Chapter Eleven:

ALL THE WORLD'S KNOWLEDGE IN A FORMULA.

An important aspect of Cubism was its relationship with
the scientific revolution of the time. The total 'newness'
(as it seemed) of the Cubist paintings was appropriate to
a period in which the very bases of all previous knowledge
seemed to have been undermined, and unimaginable new vistas
of science seemed to be opening up. This chapter deals with
what Khlebnikov felt to be his own contribution to this
revolution in human knowledge.

ALONG WITH THE UNITY OF HUMAN TONGUES, the unity of all know-
ledge became for Khlebnikov an ever more potent dream. In
search of its fulfilment, the poet began studying an extra-
ordinarily wide variety of facts culled from the library-
books he could lay his hands on. "I am studying mountains
and their location on the earth's crust", he wrote to Kruch-
enykh in 1913.[1] He also built complicated equations designed
to express the motions of the planets and their relation to
the speed of light. His equation for the planet Earth looked
like this:

$$M.\ 365.24.60.60.v. = PR^2 - \frac{48PR^2}{365}.$$

The equation for Jupiter was more complicated:

$$300.00\ .\ 1044\ .\ 11\ .\ 6000\ .\ 86400 = 3.777^2 10^{12} - \frac{48\ .\ 3\ .\ 777^2\ .\ 10^{12}}{1044}$$

He wrote that it was the same for Venus, and that "in this
consists the first boomerang aimed at Newton".[2]

Khlebnikov's thirst for mathematical material seemed
unquenchable. To his friend Spassky he wrote:

I need books with numbers in them.[3]

It was almost as if it hardly mattered what the subject of
study was, so long as the information could be expressed in
numerical form. In May 1914 he wrote to Kamensky:

A business proposition: jot down the days and hours
of your emotions, as if they moved like the stars. Yours
and hers. And namely their angles, turns, climax points.
And I will construct an equation![4]

1. Neizd. P p 367.
2. Nesob. P., pp 444-45.
3. Quoted by Markov, Russian Futurism, p 301.
4. Neizd. P., p 369.

Khlebnikov studied the chronicle of Pushkin's life—and Gogol's—in order to construct still more equations.[1] He made detailed notes of the exact times of the experiences of his own life and discovered perfect mathematical correlations. To Matyushin he wrote in December 1914, for example:

> This year I notice a reverse relationship with the past. That is, the days which were gloomy for me last year have been bright this year.[2]

Later he would ponder on the significance of the fact that "the number of bones in a human being is 48 times 5 = 240", and that "the surface of a red blood cell is equal to the surface of the earth divided by 365 to the power of ten."[3]

> Max Rychner writes of Joyce's <u>Ulysses</u> that in it:

> Nothing is isolated or separate; even the most singular, the most incomprehensible thing makes itself felt in countless connections which at first are unrecognizable, but reveal themselves in their darkness to sympathetic men.[4]

The same notion of universal interconnectedness runs through Khlebnikov's work. His studies of the planets and stars are based on the firm belief that the laws governing their motions are the same as those governing the lives of men. As he put it himself:

> The breath of the same mouth of time covers both the windowpanes of stars and the panes of human destinies; the same laws work in both.[5]

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1. SP V pp 271-273.
2. Neizd. P p 375.
3. SP V p 242.
4. Extract in: Denning, op cit p 742.
5. Nesob. P p 509.

But above all, Khlebnikov's work is about the history of
mankind, the rise and fall of empires, wars, revolutions and
the laws of time underlying these events.[1] It was this historical
process which Khlebnikov dreamed of mastering with his "equat-
ions" and his plan for a world-government or "Presidents of the
Terrestrial Sphere". Early in the course of the First World
War—in the first or second week of December, 1914—he became
excitedly convinced that he could "foresee" some of the major
battles of the war. To Matyushin he wrote:

> These days are important to me because, according to my
> calculations, on the fifteenth and twentieth of December
> there ought to be some naval battles of the first magnit-
> ude. I wrote about this long ago to Kuzmin (his address
> is Kuzmin, First Aviation Company, Polytechnical Institute,
> Petrograd). And now, today, on the sixteenth, our paper
> publishes "rumours of a major naval engagement." Tomorrow
> I will know for sure whether one occurred or not. If it
> did, then I will be able to determine exactly the dates
> of the great naval battles—and their outcome—for the
> whole of this war. The days and nights of conquest! I have
> picked on this day as an experiment. If it turns out wrong,
> then I will chuck in the computations, the regularities of
> exhausting calculations. And for a whole month I have been
> living only for this.[2]

Unfortunately, the "rumours" proved without substance and the
eagerly-expected battles failed to materialize. Undaunted,
Khlebnikov wrote to Matyushin acknowledging his "mistake" and
outlining the premises on which his calculations had been
based. Essentially, his idea seems to have been that corres-
pondences can be established across time: that the great events

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1. Compare with Walter Rybert's comment on **Finnegans Wake** that
   it is about "man's history, the rise and fall of his civil-
   izations, his nations and his families..."—extract in:
   Denning, op cit p 733.
2. Neizd. P p 374.

of world history are repetitions, on a different plane, of
events which occurred in the distant past. As he explained to
Matyushin, his premise was:

> The assumption that a particular war is a repetition of
> age-old times preceding it...[1]

Another premise—flowing from this—was:

> that, as regards the naval war of 1914, one must turn
> to the century of battles waged by Islam against the
> West from the beginning of the Crusades to 1095.[2]

A third assumption was that, once a correspondence between two
events has been established, the same correspondence would be
found to extend to cover yet further events.

Having admitted his mistakes, Khlebnikov did not abandon
his attempts but plunged deeper into them. He later described
how he had to be rescued from his obsession by his friends:

> Khlebnikov drowned in a bog of calculations, and was
> forcibly saved.[3]

In 1916 he wrote to two friends of the ultimate aim of his
researches:

> The summit—the whole of knowledge in a single equation
> the size of $\sqrt{-1}$ [3]

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1. Neizd. P p 375.
2. Ibid p 376. There seems to be an important relationship bet-
   ween Khlebnikov's theory of temporal correspondences and a
   central theme of the Symbolists. In the case of the latter,
   "correspondences" were established, by means of the sounds and
   symbols of language, between "this world" and "other worlds"
   conceived to exist on other planes in a preponderantly time-
   less, motionless state of being. The Symbolists' language was
   thought of as suffused with the light from these other worlds,
   into which the reader was thereby brought into contact. Khleb-
   nikov's peculiar transformation of this idea was primarily
   based on its re-construction, as it were, along a time-axis.
   This would have been in accordance with his call: "Replace the
   concept of space everywhere with the concept of time"—1915-16
   SP V p 159. Thus it was the future with which his language was
   suffused: "Learn: upon language the future's shadow is cast"—
   1914, SP V p 193; "...the homeland of creation is the future.
   It is from there that the word-gods blow their wind"—SP II
   p 8. The "other world" into which his work ushered humanity
   was this future, with which there were "correspondences" with
   the pre-historic past.
3. SP V p 307.

Chapter Twelve:

THE PRESIDENT OF THE TERRESTRIAL SPHERE.

This chapter begins by returning to the year 1908, in
order to trace the origins of the impulse which led
Khlebnikov eventually to his world-government plan.
The idea of "presiding" over the entire globe repres-
ents another aspect of that "carrying to extremes" of
Symbolist premises—while at the same time overthrowing
them—which has been discussed in earlier chapters.
It represents another aspect of the explosion of the
"I" and its merging in a global "We" which has been
described as central to Khlebnikov's work. The chapter
concludes with a survey of some of the scientific and
technological projects which Khlebnikov's world-gov-
ernment was to implement.

IN 1908, KHLEBNIKOV had already begun to recoil from the Symbolists' sense of futility, powerlessness and the imminence of catastrophe. As a Symbolist himself, he had written to his fellow-artists:

> We know nothing, we foretell nothing, we simply ask in terror: has the time really come, really come?[1]

Khlebnikov soon decided that "the time" had come, and that the much-feared ultimate cataclysm should be positively welcomed and plunged into.[2] The experience of uncertainty was in this way overcome, while the feeling of "knowing nothing" and "foretelling" nothing was replaced by the sensation of knowing everything and foretelling everything, as we have seen.

In a similar "turning inside out" of Symbolist forms and premises,[3] Khlebnikov reached his own form of artistic collectivism not by a crude negation of the Symbolists' "ego" but by expanding its walls, until it became so enormous and vaguely-defined as to appear to merge with the human collectivity. An aspect of this process was his peculiar idea of becoming the "King of Time" and the "President of the Terrestrial Sphere".

The poet's first mention of his "Government" project seems to have been made in a letter to Kamensky written in the spring

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1. Neizd. P p 322.
2. It was partly for this reason that Khlebnikov (like Mayakovsky) for a brief period actually welcomed the First World War. Another reason was that Khlebnikov saw in it an aspect of the struggle of the East against the West. See Nesob. P pp 405-06. A fierce anti-militarism soon replaced these moods, however.
3. "Artistic creation is always a complicated turning inside out of old forms, under the influence of new stimuli which originate outside of art"—Trotsky, Lit. & Rev'n., quoted in: Leon Trotsky on Literature and Art, N Y 1970, p 37 (introduction by P N Siegel).

of 1914. Here the idea that "the time" had arrived was fervently
expressed, even though introduced in the form of a question:

> All in all, isn't it time to rush to Razin's boats?
> Everything is ready. We will form a Government of the
> Presidents of the Terrestrial Sphere. Prepare a list.
> Send it.[1]

The "list", presumably, was to be of the names of the artists
or others willing to "join" his supposed "Government." The
central figure in the Government was obviously going to be
Khlebnikov himself. The poet was allowing his "ego" to become
inflated in his own dream-world to an extent which might have
embarrassed even a Mayakovsky, or one of the most self-centred
of the Symbolists. In 1916, Khlebnikov wrote, referring to his
alter-ego, "Ka":

> Ka became my teacher. Under his guidance, I gradually
> became the chief of the terrestrial sphere. I received
> a letter: "To the Chief of the Terrestrial Sphere"—
> there were no other words.[2]

But in being expanded on this scale, Khlebnikov's "ego" was
in a sense being turned inside-out and dissolved into an
apparent one-ness with the entire human race. This paradoxical
route to collectivism—through a carrying of egotism to imposs-
ible extremes—was also characteristic of Mayakovsky. As Trotsky
notes in this connection:

> The universalization of one's ego breaks down, to some
> extent, the limits of one's individuality, and brings
> one nearer to the collectivity—from the reverse end.[3]

It was, of course, the same death of the "I" and birth of the
"We" which we noted earlier that underlay this process. Trotsky's
comment here is that "extremes meet", and it is this process of
transformation of things into their opposites which explains why

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1. SP V p 303.
2. Ibid p 137.
3. Trotsky adds: "But this is true only to a certain degree..."—
   Literature and Revolution, p 149.

for all the apparent egotism just mentioned, D S Mirsky could
write that the "I" never became a poetic theme with Khlebnikov.[1]
The poet's peculiar impersonalism or collectivism was a point
fervently insisted upon by the Cubo-Futurists, who distinguished
themselves thereby from the so-called "Ego-Futurists". Boris
Lavrenyev writes how, at a meeting between the ego- and cubo-
futurists in his apartment in 1913, David Burlyuk denounced
the former because they

> were really not futurists at all and had no right to
> usurp that name... By the very prefix "ego", the ego-
> futurists underlined their narrow individualist horizon...
> "You are egoists, while we Khlebnikovians, we Hileans are
> universalists", David said.[2]

Khlebnikov's championship of the power of the "We" appears
in a variety of forms throughout his work, from the sound of
"thousands of voices" (accompanied by the rumblings of mount-
ains) shouting "We can!" in "Zangezi" to a note in which,
writing of himself, Khlebnikov explains:

The iron sword of the "We" cut the "I"-sword of copper.[3]

The re-construction or re-unification of the archaic tribal
"We" of humanity was of course, as we have seen, the ultimate
aim of all Khlebnikov's linguistic efforts. The fragmentation
of the ancient unity into separate "egos" is lamented in the
following poetic lines:

> Ведь мы и ведьмы я
> Великой ведуньи мы (не тьмы, а мы)
> Стоим у ворот великого Мы...
>
> Ведь мы мирское целое
> Делим на я, на множество я,
> Муку я.
> Дерево Господина Народа
> Мелем на я,
> Состоим из многих частей.[4]

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1. Quoted by Markov. For this and similar comments by critics,
   see his The Longer Poems... p 34.
2. Quoted in: Woroszylsky, op cit p 85.
3. Zangezi: SP III p 339; "Iron sword" sentence: SP V p 43.
4. SP V pp 112-113; written in 1922.

If in his world-government project, Khlebnikov in one sense carried the "I"-principle to extremes, it was really to transcend this principle altogether and re-unite the "I's" of all humanity into the primeval "We". As Khlebnikov described his own work:

> I piece together the human race, like the parts
> Of a whole conceived long ago.[1]

In 1916, Khlebnikov wrote an extraordinary manifesto entitled "Martian Trumpet", to which he obtained the signatures of a number of colleagues, and which he himself signed in the capacity of "The King of Time, Velimir Ist". It began with an attack on existing states for being based on spatial axes rather than on the axis of time. The next section was an attack on those subordinated to the reign of byt:

> Those who are drowned in the laws of family-life and the laws of commerce—those who have only one speech: "I eat"—do not understand us, thinking neither of this, nor that, nor the other.[2]

These sections of the population were identified with the older generations. Satisfied with the present constitution of things, they were nearer death than birth. "But we", Khlebnikov continued,

> we have explored the soil of the continent of Time—and have found it to be fruitful... We call you to a land where the trees speak, where associations of scientists resemble waves, where there are spring troops of love, where Time blossoms like a bird-cherry tree and moves like a piston, and where transman in a carpenter's apron saws time into boards and like a lathe-operator handles his own tomorrow.[3]

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1. SP I p 177.
2. SP V p 152.
3. Loc cit. Khlebnikov's classification of the opposing forces in society can be compared with Mayakovsky's version: "to be a bourgeois does not mean to own capital or squander gold. It means to be the heel of a corpse on the throat of the young. It means a mouth stopped up with fat. To be a proletarian doesn't mean to have a dirty face and work in a factory; it means to be in love with the future that's going to explode the filth of the cellars...Believe me"—quoted by Jakobson, On a Generation... in: E J Brown, op cit p 13.

Khlebnikov called on the world's youth to "raise the winged sails of time" and to strike "a new blow in the eyes of the crude folk of space".[1] He then went on to explain that the struggle of youth against age was also the fight of inventors (<u>izobretateli</u>) against proprietors (<u>priobretateli</u>). Scientific inventors fought for time; property-owners only for space, stealing the produce of inventors in the process. Khlebnikov gave an example of this theft:

> From the standpoint of the proprietors themselves, the whole of modern industry on the terrestrial sphere is "theft" (in the proprietors' language and morals) from the first inventor—Gauss. He founded the study of lightning. And yet during his life he did not have 150 rubles annually for his scientific work.[2]

After further explanations, Khlebnikov concluded—placing himself and his colleagues in the camp of "inventors":

> That is why, fully conscious of their special nature, different morality and peculiar mission, the inventors separate themselves from the proprietors in a sovereign state of time (without space), placing rods of iron between themselves and <u>them</u>.[3]

At about the same time that he wrote this manifesto, Khlebnikov made a series of "proposals". One was to use heartbeats as the "monetary units of the future".[4] Another was:

> Put an end to the Great War with the first flight to the Moon.[5]

A selection of various other "proposals" follows:

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1. SP V pp 152-53.
2. Ibid p 153.
3. Loc cit.
4. Ibid p 157. There is an echo of this idea in Mayakovsky's <u>Man</u>, in which the bourgeois enemy declares: "If the heart is everything then why, why have I been gathering you, my dear money!"—quoted in: Jakobson, <u>On a Generation</u>, in: E J Brown, op cit p 15.
5. SP V p 157.

Let air-sailing be one foot, and the gift of spark-speech the other foot of humanity. What next: we'll see.

Introduce monkeys into the family of man and give them certain rights of citizenship.

Establish a special empty island (Iceland, for example), as a place for uninterrupted war between those of all countries who want it. (Splendid death).

Introduce as much order and system into the business of giving birth as now prevails in the business of killing; birth-armies, in limited numbers.

Replace the concept of space everywhere with the concept of time—for example, wars between the generations of the terrestrial sphere, wars of time-entrenchments.

It would be impossible to avoid destroying trains, if their movements were limited only to within space...

A re-organization of housing rights. The right to rooms in any town, and the right to change one's dwelling-place continually (the right to a home independently of the dimensions of space). Airborne mankind does not let private space restrict his property.

Construct houses in the form of iron lattice-work, so that little mobile dwellings of glass can be inserted anywhere.

Demand that armed groups of people with weapons in their hands refute the opinion of the Futurists—that the entire Terrestrial Globe belongs to them.

Arouse in factory chimney pipes the desire to sing morning praise to the rising sun—whether over the Seine, or in Tokyo, or over the Nile, or in Delhi.

Introduce radio for the transmission of lectures from the Central University to village schools. Any school at the foot of a green hill will receive scientific news, and the teacher will be the ear-trumpet of the attentive village. The language of lightnings as conductor of scientific truth.

Accomplish the transfer of power gradually to the starry sky...

Treat the Earth as a resonant plate, and its capital cities as dust nodules gathered in still waves.

The world may be understood as a light-ray. You are a construction of spaces. We are a construction of time.[1]

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1. SP V pp 158-162.

Soon after the February 1917 Revolution, Khlebnikov—convinced that his mathematical prophesies had been or were being realized—wrote ecstatically to his friend Petnikov:

> Is the universal roar of insurrections terrifying to us—when we ourselves are an insurrection still more terrible? You remember that a government of poets has been established, embracing the terrestrial sphere. You remember that a sonorous string of tribes has united Tokyo, Moscow and Singapore. We are like the sea's waves during a grey storm, one moment swelling and towering high, the next rolling down and scattering wide. You recall that we have succeeded in discovering the harmony of destinies, which we need in order to lift humanity on the palm of our thought to the next plane of existence. You know, this wandering century—is going somewhere![1]

In April, Khlebnikov made a series of notes relating to an "appearance" to be made by himself and Petnikov on some occasion. Among these notes were:

> Our answer to war—the mousetrap.
> The rays of my name.
> The ray of humanity.
> People as rays.
> Beautiful waterfalls of numbers.
> An armful of equations of fate.
> The secret of humanity.
> The ray of Khlebnikov.
> The suicide of states.
> The seige of languages.
> Logs of time.
> The ray of the world.
> The world as a poem.
> We have come to you from the future, from the distance of centuries. We gaze upon your time from the rock of the future.[2]

At about the same time, Khlebnikov composed his "Declaration of the Presidents of the Terrestrial Sphere":

> Only we, having rolled up—like a scroll—
> Your three years of war, to form a terrifying trumpet,
> Sing and shout, sing and shout,
> Drunk with the enchantment of the truth,
> That the Government of the Terrestrial Sphere
> Already exists:
> It is—We.[3]

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1. SP V p 313.
2. Ibid p 259.
3. IS p 170.

Khlebnikov blamed the War on the world's "states of space",
which he likened to the cannibalistic gods of an earlier age:

> Here in the name of all humanity
> We turn to negotiations
> With the states of the past:
> If you, O states, are so fine,
> As you love to describe yourselves,
> And as you force your servants to describe you,
> Then why this food-of-the-gods?
> Why do we, the people, crunch in your jaws—
> Between your canine teeth and your molars?[1]

In the future, explained Khlebnikov, these states would be
destroyed: a Government of Poets would have taken their place,
forming a State of Time. But that day had yet to be reached:

> And in the meantime, mothers,
> Carry your children away
> Should a state anywhere appear.
> Young people—run off and hide in the caves,
> Or in the depths of the sea
> Should you anywhere glimpse a state.
> Young girls and all those who can't tolerate the
> > > odour of death,
> Fall into a swoon at the word "frontiers":
> It stinks of corpses.[2]

In Petrograd in the spring of 1917 a grandiose "Carnival of
the Arts" was staged. Writes Kamensky:

> ...writers, artists, composers and actors moved slowly
> down the Nevsky in a procession of automobiles strewn
> with flowers. Bringing up the rear of this 'carnival'
> procession of vehicles was a big lorry, on the side of
> which was inscribed in chalk:
>
> THE PRESIDENT OF THE TERRESTRIAL SPHERE.
>
> In the lorry in a soldier's greatcoat, sitting hunched-
> up, was Khlebnikov.[3]

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1. Choix de poemes, p 102. In another version of the "declar-
   ation" Khlebnikov wrote: "If you, states, are well-behaved—
   then why this food-of-the-gods? Why do we crunch between
   your jaws—we soldiers and sailors? But then if you are bad,
   O states, who among us will raise a little finger to prevent
   your destruction?"—SP V p 163.
2. Choix de poemes, p 102.
3. Put' entuziasta, M 1931, pp 256-7; quoted by Stepanov, introd
   to IS p 49.

Chapter Thirteen:

THE WORLD AS A LIGHT-RAY: KHLEBNIKOV AND THE ELECTRONICS REVOLUTION.

Khlebnikov's technological "futurism" was far more advanced than that of his "urbanist" contemporaries such as Marinetti. Khlebnikov drew little or no inspiration from the nineteenth-century steam-age and iron-age industrial revolution. But the electronics revolution, the invention of radio and the theories of Einstein—all connected, in one way or another, with the idea of electro-magnetic waves—were something different. In this chapter it is suggested that Khlebnikov's concept of "people-rays", his idea of the whole of humanity as "inhabiting" a "light-ray of fate" and his enthusiasm for radio were interconnected, and reflected a profound conscious-ness of the importance of the "inventions" and scientific dis-coveries which formed the background to the Cubist revolution in art.

POLITICALLY, the Futurists were at heart Anarchists. The "enemy" to them was not so much the rule of Capital or of the bourgeoisie as the reign of byt, which expressed itself in the greyness and grind of daily life, the routine of work, eating and sleep, the boredom of family existence—and the all-pervading fixed regulations, institutions and hierarchies of the state. Under the rule of byt, everything was fossilized, congealed, immovable. There was existence in space: everyone struggled for his own plot, his own cabbage-patch, his own position in or portion of the Terrestrial Sphere. But it was a timeless existence, or an existence subject only to the endless repetition of time, the interminable repetition of one and the same "today".

Khlebnikov's vision of the explosion of this "byt" was intimately connected with his sense of the significance of the scientific revolution which was taking place in his time. Fundamentally, he felt that radio-waves, movement at the speed of light, electronic technology and the prospect of space-travel were creating a new kind of man, for whom the struggle for fixed territory on the planet earth was becoming irrelevant. If man could exist on all points of the globe simultaneously, how could he bother any longer about fighting for space? How could he care any longer for frontiers, for fences, for private territory or for fatherlands? And if the old immobilities were dissolving, space was disappearing and the whole earth was becoming, as it were, a "ray"—then how could the new man avoid seeing his future struggle as a struggle for change, a struggle for time?

The link between Cubist painting and radio, electronics and the theories of Einstein—a link insisted upon by virtually all critics—has been discussed already. In the case of the French painters, the link operated largely on the level of the subconscious.[1] Those closely associated with the Cubist painters, such as their dealer, Kahnweiler and the poet Apollinaire, saw the parallel with the scientific revolution, writing and speaking about it at the time or soon afterwards. But the painters themselves were almost wholly unaware of what they were doing.

In the case of Khlebnikov, things were rather different. Having studied science at University, at least the images and forms of scientific thought (if not its real methods) had probably penetrated deeply into his consciousness. Almost certainly, this made it far easier for him than it would otherwise have been to grasp intellectually the link between his art and the scientific revolution which had been taking place.

For Khlebnikov, as we have seen, the "whole of contemporary industry" was essentially electronic—it stemmed from "the first inventor, Gauss", who "founded the study of lightning." For Khlebnikov, the implications of this were enormous. He had very little enthusiasm for mechanical movements and machines—the products of the earlier industrial revolution whose praises were perhaps belatedly being sung by Marinetti. But the heroes of the new technological revolution—radio and electronics—were for him quite another matter.[2]

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1. Braque himself writes of the role of the subconscious in the Cubist revolution: "At such a time one has to follow dictates which are almost unconscious, because there is no knowing what will happen. The adventure through which one is living is one in which consciousness plays no part"—written in 1954; quoted in: John Russell, G Braque, London 1959, p 9.

2. Khlebnikov's hostility towards conventional machines is shown in his "The Crane", in which the world of machines rises up in an insurrection against man. Khlebnikov believed that "the tiniest vein on my hand is a laugh of scorn at all machines"— quoted by Stepanov, IS (introduction) p 67.

By facilitating instantaneous global communication,
Radio may be thought of as inaugurating a new age—the age
(to quote Marshall McLuhan) of "instant humans."[1] Khlebnikov
used the term "people-rays" (lyud-luchi), as we have seen.
As early as the summer of 1910, he had written to Kamensky:

> We—are a new breed of people-rays. We have come to
> illuminate the universe.[2]

And his notes about "the ray of humanity, people as rays,
the ray of Khlebnikov, the ray of the world" and so on have
already been cited.[3] When Khlebnikov wrote to Petnikov about
"a government of poets" and "a sonorous string of tribes"
encircling the globe—and went on to declare:"We are like the
sea's waves during a grey storm"—he was not being simply
mystical.[4] He had a concrete technological possibility in mind.
In 1916 he had already quite convincingly—if also in certain
respects fancifully—described this possibility. One form it
had taken was the project for a "Higher Institute of Futurists",
which would occupy not a particular geographical site but many
sites widely separated over the globe (on the Asian side,
however), its members communicating by means of radio-teleg-
raphy:

> Foundation of the first Higher Institute of Futurists
> (budetlyan). It consists of a number (13) of estates
> borrowed (for 100 years) from people-of-space, situated
> on the sea-shore or among mountains by extinct volcanos
> in Siam, Siberia, Japan, Ceylon, Murmansk, among the
> empty mountains, where it is difficult to acquire prop-
> erty from anyone but easy to invent things. They are all
> united with each other through radio-telegraphy, on which
> lessons are given. To have a radio-telegraph of one's own.
> Communication through the air.[5]

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1. "The age of co-presence of all individuals is the age of
   communication—the age of instant humans"—Counter-Blast,
   London 1969, p 35.
2. SP V p 291.
3. Ibid p 259.
4. The Symbolist composer Scriabin had written in his 1905-
   06 notebooks:"The whole world is inundated by the waves of
   my being"; in 1904 he had written: "I want to be the bright-
   est light, the greatest (and only) sun. I want to illuminate
   the universe with my light"—quoted in: Faubion Bowers,
   Scriabin, p 101; p 54. Khlebnikov was partially de-mysticiz-
   ing this streak in Symbolism, giving it a technological twist.
5. SP V p 156.

This should be seen also in the context of the passages quoted already, in which Khlebnikov envisaged radio-transmission of lectures "to any school at the foot of a green hill", saw "the language of lightning" as the "conductor of scientific truth", and hailed "air-sailing" and "the gift of spark-speech" as the two new "feet" of humanity.

A reading of Khlebnikov's writings on "fate"—especially his post-revolutionary ones—shows that the idea of motion at the speed of light and the concept of humanity as a sort of "light-ray" or radio-wave were not mere incidental notions but were absolutely fundamental to his developing world-view. In his now-characteristic way, he saw the "ray of humanity"—in his "Nasha Osnova" written in 1920—as moving not through space but through time. He likened the 317-yearly "shifts" of human history (which he believed he had 'discovered') to the vibrations of a balalaika-string. This was only one of several such balalaika-notes: the vibrations of another string were manifested in people's heart-beats and footsteps; another represented "the central axis of the sonorous world."[1] But for Khlebnikov, the long-wave string—pulsing at intervals of 317 years—was the most important one. The extent to which the idea of electro-magnetic waves and their control had penetrated into Khlebnikov's consciousness may be gauged from the following passage, in which the poet elaborates his idea of humanity as a ray through time:

> Once science had measured the light-wave, studying it in the light of figures, it became possible to regulate the course of rays. The image of a distant star is brought up close to the writing-table with these mirrors. The sizes of infinitely small things, previously invisible, become accessible view...
> Let us suppose that a light-wave were populated by rational beings, with their government, laws and even prophets. Wouldn't it appear to them that a scientist who used mirrors to regulate the course of waves was an almighty

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1. SP V p 239.

divinity? If prophets existed on such a light-wave,
they would glorify the scientist's power and flatter
him: "You breathe—and the oceans move; you speak—
and they flow back"; they would lament that they
could not do this themselves.

Now, having studied the mighty rays of human fate,
whose waves are populated by people, each single pulse
lasting for centuries, human thought can aspire to apply
to them the techniques of mirror-regulation, building a
force consisting of a pair of convex and concave lenses.
It may be imagined that the century-sized oscillations of
our giant ray will be no less obedient to the scientist
than infinitely small waves of light-ray. Then people
will be at one and the same time both the population in-
habiting the light-ray—and the scientist directing the
course of these rays, altering their direction at will.[1]

If all this seems rather far-fetched, we should perhaps turn
to a more convincing Utopian vision: Khlebnikov's "Radio of
the Future", which deals less with time than with the conquest
of space. To a certain extent, it is a vision which has al-
ready come true, but it is remarkable that it should have been
written as early as in 1921:

The Radio of the future—the main tree of consciousness—
will open up a knowledge of countless tasks and will unite
all mankind.

Around the Radio's central station, this iron palace,
where clouds of wires stream out like strands of hair,
there will surely be posted a skull and cross-bones with
the familiar inscription: 'Danger!' For the slightest
halt in the working of the Radio would produce a spiritual
swoon of the entire country, a temporary loss of its con-
sciousness.

The Radio becomes the spiritual sun of the country, the
great sorcerer and ensorceler.

Imagine the Radio's central station: A spider web of
lines in the air, a cloud of lightning-flashes, now ex-
tinguishing themselves, now re-igniting, running from one
end of the building to the other. A skyblue globule of
circular lightning hovering in the air like a timid bird,
tackle stretched obliquely.

Around the clock, from this point on the terrestrial
sphere, flocks of news-items from the life of the spirit
scatter like the spring flight of birds.

In this stream of lightning-birds, the spirit will prev-
ail over force, good advice over intimidation.

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1. SP V pp 239-40.

> The activities of the artist of the pen and the artist of the brush, the discoveries of the artists of thought (Mechnikov, Einstein) suddenly transporting mankind to new shores...
> The task of communing with the one soul of mankind, with the one quotidian spiritual wave which sweeps over the country every day, drenching it with a rain of scientific and artistic news—the Radio has accomplished this task with the aid of lightning.[1]

Khlebnikov is already prophesying the invention of television. The Radio, he writes,

> has sent coloured shadows out on its instruments, so that the whole country and every village can become a communicant in an exhibition of paintings from the distant capital. The exhibition is transmitted by impulses of light and is repeated in thousands of mirrors through all of the Radio's stations. If previously the Radio was the ears of the world, now it is the eyes which admit no distance.[2]

This is Khlebnikov's vision of "the conquest of space" in the future:

> Proud skyscrapers plunging into the clouds, a game of chess between two people located at opposite ends of the globe, a lively conversation between a man in America and a man in Europe...
> Thus the Radio will forge the unbroken links of the world soul and fuse together all mankind.[3]

The sensation of existing in the form of a radio-wave—roaming freely over the spaces of the globe—is conveyed in the following poetic lines:

> I am a wave, rolling down,
> From the white brow of a mountain in Iran,
> And reflected in black

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1. SP IV, pp 290-291.
2. Ibid p 292.
3. Ibid p 293.

From the antennae-eyes of a lobster
As it runs obliquely to the side
While a wild-eyed maiden
Rides an ass...

I ran
Along a wave, cut
By a whale's tail,
And sea-jelly,
And Einstein's radio
About spectral suns...

I rose in the air
Like steam
Spiralling in a column
Like a white tree
A clean birch standing on the sea...

I tickled
An American air-pilot's
Coarse moustache,
And heard the wheel
Of the wagon of the skies in my ears...

And then, like a ray,
I flew to a star.
And there a wise man said:
Here's a fragment
Of an unknown star...[1]

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1. SP V pp 101-02.

Chapter Fourteen:

THE CONTRADICTIONS OF KHLEBNIKOV—REAL OR IMAGINED?

The ground has now been prepared for a discussion of the
main theme: the underlying logic connecting together the
various aspects of Khlebnikov's thought and work. His love
of the past is usually thought of as being inconsistent
with his "futurism". This brief chapter simply presents
this misconception without dealing with it in any depth:
it will be answered in the chapters following.

THERE IS A VIEW among critics that Khlebnikov was a mass of contradictions. In many ways he was, as perhaps the preceding pages have helped to show. But the contradictions were in certain crucial respects not nearly so fundamental as is usually alleged.

The chief accusation made against Khlebnikov has usually been of an inconsistency between his primitivist poetic practice and his allegiance to "the future". Marinetti himself was one of the earliest to lay this charge, when he attacked Russian Futurism as "savagism", and asked, referring to Khlebnikov:

> Why is this archaism necessary? Is it really capable of expressing the whole complexity of the tempo of contemporary life?[1]

A comparable remark of Chukovsky's—in which he points to the paradox of "futurists" who choose to write in pre-historic cries and screams—has already been cited.[2] The Soviet critic Gofman similarly concludes that

> in founding his system of a 'universal language', and in transforming the language of poetry, Khlebnikov attempted to establish structural and semantic principles more characteristic of one of the ancient phases of the evolution of vocal speech than of 'the language of the future', no matter how this is conceived.[3]

And Renato Poggioli cannot understand why Khlebnikov thought of himself as a futurist at all:

> Khlebnikov's Utopia is regressive and retrospective: it repudiates our own steel or iron age for a mythical age of gold, even for a stone or wooden age.[4]

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1. Quoted in: Barooshian, op cit p 151.
2. Quoted in: ibid, p 95.
3. Yazykovye novatorstvo Khlebnikova, p 225.
4. Russian Futurism, Khlebnikov, Esenin, SEEJ, XVI 1 p 10.

Poggioli concludes, rather amazingly, that Khlebnikov's poetry

> has little to do with the movement to which he gave his
> allegiance.[1]

Even Markov accepts the idea of the same contradiction, as when
he writes:

> Khlebnikov's work is built on a conflict between modernity
> (his thought) and the past (his poetry).[2]

For those who hold this view, Khlebnikov's enthusiastic
espousal of "inventions", and particularly Radio, was a surface
phenomenon, developed rather late in the poet's life, derived
externally from the avant-garde milieu in which he mixed and
having little to do with—and indeed conflicting with—the
more deeply-rooted and original linguistic and poetic practice
which was developed at an earlier stage.

In the present work an opposite view will be put forward.
It is suggested that an important aspect of Khlebnikov's early
linguistic practice was its character as a revolt against the
forms and conventions of literacy. Far from conflicting with
the poet's later espousal of Radio, it in a certain sense antic-
ipated it. For if Radio really does mark, in a sense, the beg-
inning of a new age of communication, then one of its important
features is a certain transcendance over the written word—and a
new emphasis on the primacy of the voice. In emphasizing the
oral tradition of culture—the "song" as opposed to the "book"—
Khlebnikov may have been helping to familiarize his contempor-
aries with the new oral emphasis which the age of Radio seemed
to be promising.

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1. Loc cit.
2. The Longer Poems, p v.

Chapter Fifteen:

THE ELECTRONICS REVOLUTION: McLUHAN.

Khlebnikov's association of the electronic future with
the pre-historic past is an idea which is also central
to the theories of the 'media-philosopher' Marshall
McLuhan. For McLuhan, the electronic future will be a
'return' to the pre-literate past in the sense that it
will be an age, once again, of the spoken word. The
primacy of writing, and of the culture of literacy, is
destined to be overthrown by the age of Radio and TV.

ONE OF KHLEBNIKOV'S MANIFESTOS begins with a radio-call: "To all!
To all! To all!"[1] There is a crucial point in Joyce's "Finnegans
Wake" where a similar call is made:

> Sandhias! Sandhias! Sandhias!
> Calling all downs. Calling all downs to dayne. Array!
> Surrection. Eire-weeker to the wohld bludyn world. O
> rally, O rally, O rally! Phlenxty, O rally! To what
> lifelike thyne of the bird can be.[2]

The Eastern note (the first thrice-repeated word is a chant
from a Sanskrit prayer), the call to the "whole world", the
idea of re-birth (the resurrection and the Phoenix) and the idea
of mankind being able to live like a bird—all these show that
the parallels with Khlebnikov are quite close. Marshall McLuhan
thinks that

> James Joyce's book is about the electrical retribalization
> of the West and the West's effect on the East...[3]

What he means is that "Finnegans Wake" is a sort of premonition
of the end of literature, the end of the age of literacy, as
Radio and electronic communications media threaten to supplant
the familiar primacy in art and culture of the written word.
The complete dominance in culture of the written word has been
a largely Western fact: the cultures of the East have preserved
more of their tribal, oral heritage. Hence the coming of Radio
in a sense redresses the balance between East and West, inasmuch
as it promises, on the one hand the superseding of the West's
culture of literacy, and on the other an extraordinary new life
on a global scale for a transformed version of the oral cultures
of the East.[4]

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1. SP V p 164.
2. Finnegans Wake, first lines of last chapter.
3. War and Peace in the Global Village, p 4.
4. Ibid p 128.

It is not necessary to accept all of McLuhan's positions in order to concede that his views are of some importance to an understanding of much modern art. In his view, the habits and conventions of literacy have imposed their own assumptions on Western consciousness to a much greater degree than has been supposed. When communicating through writing, the individual senses his isolation, his separation in space from other "I's", to a much greater degree than when communication is through the spoken word.[1] The emphasis which literacy places on the visual sense—to the exclusion of hearing and touch—again helps under-line this spatial separateness, since it is the eye above all which permits the sense of perspective and orientates the indiv-idual in space. By placing a new emphasis on the ear, Radio tends to dissolve the sense of spatial separation. And, as Mc-Luhan argues,

> As visual space is superseded, we discover that there is no continuity or connectedness, let alone depth and perspect-ive, in any of the other senses. The modern artist—in music, in painting, in poetry—has been patiently expounding this fact for some decades, insisting that we educate our long neglected senses of touch and taste and hearing.[2]

In McLuhan's view, the 'return', by means of Radio, to a new form of oral culture similar in many respects to the pre-literate tribal cultures of the past—makes possible a transcendance of the spatial separateness which has been a characteristic of the literate "I":

> An oral or tribal society has the means of stability far beyond anything possible to a visual or civilized and frag-mented world. The oral and auditory are structured by a total and simultaneous field of relations describable as "acoustic space". Quite different is the visual world where special goals and points of view are natural and inevitable.[3]

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1. Counter-Blast, p 73: "With the book came silent, solitary reading".
2. War and Peace in the Global Village, p 13.
3. Ibid p 23.

McLuhan's method is exaggeration. When he claims that
"civilization is entirely the product of phonetic literacy"[1],
or that "the invention of Euclidean space is, itself, a
direct result of the action of the phonetic alphabet on the
human senses"[2], one has to allow for the exaggeration in order
to appreciate the element of truth in what he says. According
to McLuhan, the invention of writing coincided with the
appearance of the bureaucrat—and hence the state:

> A goose quill put an end to talk, abolished mystery,
> gave us enclosed space and towns, brought roads and
> armies and bureaucracies.[3]

This new form of "language", in other words, had certain
social or political correlates which were inherent in the
language-form as such, regardless of what was actually being
"said". This is what McLuhan means when he says "the medium
is the message": in a long-term historical sense, written
language always "says" the same thing, not by virtue of its
content but by virtue of its form. No matter what was written
on it, papyrus as such

> meant control and direction of armies at a distance from
> a central bureaucracy.[4]

Literacy divorced men from the living web of social reciprocity;
it gave men "the power to act without reacting."[5] The "I" was
no longer in a reciprocal relationship with other "I's"—it
could now assert itself one-sidedly, bureaucratically, from
above. On a less political level, writing meant a parallel
"fossilization" of emotions and being:

> Writing meant that the acoustic world with its magic
> power over the being of things was arrested and banished
> to a humble sphere. Writing meant the power of fixing the
> flux of words and of thought.[6]

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1. War and Peace in the Global Village, p 24.
2. Understanding Media: quoted in: Sidney Finkelstein, Sense
   and Nonsense of McLuhan, N Y 1968 p 15.
3. Counter-Blast, p 14.
4. War and Peace etc., p 26.
5. Understanding Media, p 20.
6. Counter-Blast, p 115.

But just as all this is what writing "says" (regardless of what might happen to be written), so oral language—and its resurrection in Radio—has a definite "message" of its own. In writing about Radio, McLuhan has a tendency to describe certain possibilities or potentialities as if they were already facts. Making all due allowances for this, however—and for his usual exaggeration—it seems that he has something important to say about the "message" which the electronic media may bring. McLuhan's relevance to a study of Khlebnikov should be obvious:

> By surpassing writing, we have regained our sensorial WHOLENESS, not on a national or cultural plane, but on a cosmic plane. We have evoked a super-civilized sub-primitive man.[1]

By restoring in a new form the oral cultures and priorities of the past, Radio brings a future which is also a kind of 'return' to the prehistoric past:

> Bless the electric return to the tribal paleolithic age, to the world of the hunter![2]

Or again:

> We begin to structure the primordial feelings and emotions from which 3,000 years of literacy divorced us.[3]

In that sense, we are back again in the beginning of the world:

> Extensions of man are the hominization of the world. It is a 2nd phase of the original creation.[4]

Or, in another sense, it is the end of the world:

> Just as history begins with writing, so it ends with TV.[5]

The basic fact of the new "language-form" is that it presupposes and in a sense creates a new awareness of unity:

> We begin to realize the depth of our involvement in one another as a total human community.[6]

Or again:

1. Counter-Blast p 16.
2. Ibid p 43.
3. Ibid p 17.
4. Ibid p 34.
5. Ibid p 122.
6. Ibid p 37.

Today, electronics and automation make mandatory that
everybody adjust to the vast global environment as if
it were his little home town.[1]

In McLuhan's view, computers and electronics are destined to
enable man to treat the entire globe almost as a work of art.
Writing of the computer, for example, he states:

Its true function is to program and orchestrate terres-
trial and galactic environments and energies in a har-
monious way.[2]

He adds:

In merely terrestrial terms, programming the environment
means, first of all, a kind of console for global thermo-
stats to pattern all sensory life in a way conducive to
comfort and happiness. Till now, only the artist has been
permitted the opportunity to do this in the most puny
fashion.[3]

Again, there is a 'return' to the pre-literate conception of art

From the beginnings of literacy until now, art has mostly
been thought of as representation, a kind of matching of
inner and outer environments. Primitive man and post-lit-
erate man agree that art is making and that it affects the
universe.[4]

This new art-form operates on a vast scale:

Technological art takes the whole earth and its population
as its material, not as its form.[5]

And so a completely new role opens up for the artist:

The Ivory Tower becomes the Control Tower of Human
Navigation.[6]

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1. War and Peace etc., p 11. In a reference, presumably, to the
   anti-war youth-movements of the 1960's, McLuhan says: "All
   our teen-agers are now tribal. That is, they recognize their
   total involvement in the human family regardless of their
   personal goals or backgrounds"—Counter-Blast, p 143.
2. War and Peace etc., p 89.
3. Ibid p 90.
4. Ibid p 92.
5. Counter-Blast, p 53.
6. Counter-Blast, last words in book, p 144.

Chapter Sixteen:

KHLEBNIKOV: THE REVOLT AGAINST LITERACY.

McLuhan sees the essence of the electronics revolution as the overthrow of the cultural tradition of literacy. This chapter shows how Khlebnikov's work can be seen as in a sense anticipating or paralleling this overthrow in the realm of art.

IN AN EARLIER CHAPTER, the Russian concept of 'byt' was dis-
cussed. We noted Jakobson's remarks about the peculiarly
Russian historical consciousness of the precarious reign of
'byt'—of fixed norms, conventions and order—over an ocean
of chaos. And mention was made of the fact that a very similar
consciousness was prevalent not only in Russia but throughout
Europe in the immediate pre-war period in which Cubism was
born.[1]

Russian Futurism, we have seen, was in large part a revolt
against '_byt_'. The Sun in Mayakovsky's "Extraordinary Adventure"
comes down from the sky and drives the fires back—"for the
first time since creation". Everything in the Futurists' poetry
seemed new, strange—reminiscent in part of what Khlebnikov
called "those first days of life on earth", when mountains
belched lava and there were three suns in the sky. Khlebnikov's
word-creation was designed to make words sparkle with fresh
life, in his own words, "as in the first days of creation".
For both Mayakovsky and Khlebnikov, the age they were entering
was a "second re birth" of mankind.

For Kruchenykh, all previous art in Russia had consisted
merely of

> pitiful attempts on the part of servile thought to re-
> create its _byt_, its philosophy and its psychology...[2]

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1. The poet Pierre Reverdy, an associate of the Cubists, writes
   that the year 1911 was a time "when the future was quite
   bare and the present unusually complex and precarious... I
   doubt if ever before in the history of art was there so much
   sunshine, so many blue skies, so much responsibility so
   bravely assumed, or so great a gap set between disaster and
   the hoped-for"—_Une Aventure Methodique_ (1949), quoted in:
   John Russell, _G Braque_, London 1959 p 13.
2. A Kruchenykh, _Novye Puti Slova_, (1913); in: V Markov (ed),
   Manifesty i Programmy russkikh futuristov, 1967, p 65.

Ever since the "Lay of Igor's Campaign" and the period of the byliny, real word-art had fallen into disuse and

> everything was done to muffle the primeval feeling for the native language...[1]

The word had become an automatic, mechanical, repetitive instrument of thought, while

> everything which connects it with its kinsmen and the springs of existence—is unnoticed.[2]

It was in a revolt against the reign of byt in language that Kruchenykh made such exaggerated statements as

> the more disorder we introduce into the construction of sentences—the better.[3]

<div align="center">*   *   *   *   *</div>

We have noted that Khlebnikov championed Russia's "singers" as opposed to her "writers".[4] He believed that "the song" and "the book" in Russia belonged in "different camps".[5] He yearned for a "bonfire of books"[6]—and also for a "second language of songs."[7] He described his word-creation technique as "the enemy of the bookish fossilization of language."[8] Livshits praised Khlebnikov for "a discovery of language in its liquid state."[9] Khlebnikov condemned "language borrowed from dusty libraries" as "alien, not one's own language".[10] And he curiously associated the overthrow of this "bookish-fossilized" language— with the unification of mankind and the overthrow of all "states of space."[11]

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1. Ibid p 65.
2. Ibid pp 66-67.
3. Ibid p 68.
4. SP V p 182.
5. Loc cit.
6. SP V p 183.
7. Ibid p 210.
8. Ibid p 233.
9. Quoted by Markov, Russian Futurism, p 189.
10. SP V p 223.
11. Ibid pp 313-14.

It is in its written form that language corresponds most closely to the conception of 'byt'. "Arrested or frozen speech", writes McLuhan, "is writing."[1] It was therefore appropriate that Khlebnikov's poetic and linguistic practice—as a struggle against 'byt' in language—should have taken very largely the form of a revolt against the forms and conventions of literacy.

Joyce's language in Finnegans Wake has been described as that of pre historic man—language as it was prior to the development of literacy.[2] It has also been described as the language of childhood—of an age in the life of the individual before reading and writing have been learned.[3] It is also, according to most critics, the language of the dreaming mind— or of those deeper layers of the consciousness which the conventions of literacy fail to reach.[4] In all these cases—and there is no very sharp dividing line between them—the crucial point is that the language comes close to the ideal of "pure sound".[5] These remarks apply to Khlebnikov to no less a degree.

"The main point in Futurist aesthetics", writes Krystyna Pomorska,

> was the theory of the word from the aspect of sound, as the only material and theme of poetry.[6]

The idea of Futurism as above all the championship of sound for its own sake would be a simplification, especially in relation to Khlebnikov. On the other hand, to contemporaries, this was largely the impression conveyed, particularly when the new poets were compared with their Symbolist predecessors. The Symbolists

1. Counter-Blast, p 63.
2. Miller-Budnitskaya, in: Denning, op cit p 657; Malcolm Muggeridge in: ibid p 684. L A G Strong describes Joyce's method as a "technique of incantation"—ibid p 637. Rebecca West writes that Joyce's theory is "that if words are so handled as to recall meanings they had in the past we will go back into the experience of the race in these bygone phases"— ibid p 536. Marcel Brion sees an "Asiatic sense" in Joyce—428
3. A Lyner writes that reading the words of Finnegans Wake "gives us the pleasure that children get by just making sounds"— Denning, op cit p 588.
4. See: S Gilbert in: Denning, op cit p 539, p 564.
5. See: Max Eastman in: Denning, op cit p 490.
6. Pomorska, op cit p 78.

had been above all littérateurs, seeing themselves as the educated, cultured ones, living in the world of the written word.[1]
But as Chukovsky wrote of Mayakovsky (perhaps in a sense misunderstanding him, but making an important point nevertheless):

> It would be silly to call him a writer—his calling is not writing, but yelling. His medium isn't paper, but his own throat—which is natural for a poet of the revolution.[2]

Or again:

> ...he is the poet of thunder and lightning, roars and screeches; he is incapable of maintaining any sort of quiet.[3]

Khlebnikov personally was very quiet. Writing of an early public appearance of the Futurists in Moscow, Livshits recalls that Khlebnikov

> could not be allowed to mount the platform because of his weak voice and the hopeless "and so on" with which he broke up his recital after the first few lines, as if stressing the continuity of his verbal emanation.[4]

His speech-difficulties even in private have already been noted. If too much literacy creates an emphasized sense of the spatial and emotional isolation of the "I", then Khlebnikov embodied this condition in his own person to an unusual degree. The enormity of the task of penetrating space—of communicating—was for him no mere academic concept. It was a daunting and seemingly inescapable fact of his personal life. And it may be that it was precisely Khlebnikov's practical difficulties in verbally communicating that spurred his efforts to solve "the problem of communication"—leading to his stupendous output of solutions and answers on a theoretical plane. For all his personal quietness, in any event, the effect of Khlebnikov's linguistic experiments was to create a ringing awareness of the

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1. The extreme "culturedness" and "literacy" of the Symbolists—and their frequent use of abstract nouns and French and other foreign words—removed them considerably from the native Russian folk-tradition in poetry and was associated with their "quietness". See especially G Donchin, op cit, for the "bookish" effect of the Symbolists' attempts to translate French Symbolist techniques directly into Russian (esp. pp 164-6).
2. K Chukovsky, Akhmatova and Mayakovsky, in E J Brown op cit p 5C
3. Ibid p 48.
4. Polutoroglazy Strelets, in: Woroszylsky, op cit p 64.

sound-waves of language. As a theoretician and as a poet,
Khlebnikov was an inseparable part of that outburst of "thunder
and lightning, roars and screeches" of which Chukovsky speaks.
The apparently rough and elemental "loudness" and extraordinary
sound-effects of Mayakovsky's verse stemmed in fact from an ex-
tremely sophisticated poetic technique, and the pioneer in the
development of this technique was undoubtedly Khlebnikov.[1]

In the view of Roman Jakobson, Khlebnikov's technique rep-
resented a carrying to its logical conclusion of a tendency
essential to all poetic language:

> It has been observed many times in the history of the
> poetry of all peoples and countries that, as Tredyakovsky
> put it, for the poet "only sound" is important. The lang-
> uage of poetry strives to reach, as a final limit, the
> phonetic, or rather—to the extent that such a purpose
> may be present—the euphonic phrase—in other words, a
> trans-sense speech.[2]

However, in carrying this general tendency to its conclusion,
Khlebnikov was at the same time breaking new ground. All poetry
can perhaps in a sense be regarded as a use of language in a
way which runs counter to the normal tendencies of literacy.
All poetry is a kind of "song", harking back, in one way or
another, to the tradition of folk-song. But Khlebnikov's poetry
breaks with literacy to a quite unprecedented degree.

In our earlier survey of the Russian concept of 'byt',
we noted the peculiar Russian experience of the "temporariness"
of civilization, the precariousness of the "order" represented
by a city such as St Petersburg, the sense of slippage, as if
everything had been built—like St Petersburg—on a marsh. The
fact is that civilization in Russia—and with it, a literate
culture—had very shallow roots compared with its Western Europ-
ean counterparts. Even in the nineteenth century, and in the

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1. See Khardzhiev, Poeticheskaya Kultura Mayakovskogo, esp pp
   97-103.
2. Modern Russian Poetry, in: E J Brown, op cit p 82.

early decades of the twentieth, the culture-forms of literate civilization were familiar only to a relatively miniscule proportion of the population.

Some scholars would date Russian poetry only from Vasily Zhukovsky's translation of Gray's "Elegy". For this reason, the struggle of the oral against the written tradition in Russian culture has been more fierce and evident in recent times than in any West European country.

Literacy can be traced back in Russia to the introduction of Christianity in the ninth century by the missionaries from Byzantium. For centuries, literate culture was largely church culture: in a sense hostile, foreign, in a closed-in world of its own, set quite apart from the folk-culture of the Russian people. Mandel'stam writes that even in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this hostile, foreign, Byzantine, priestly nature of the written language lived on in the literate culture and language of the intelligentsia. And this again is a reason why the struggle of the oral against the written language has lived on.[1] Mandel'stam sees the written tradition as not only alienated and hostile, but also as a precarious structure in Russia. And it is a structure which Khlebnikov, identifying with the pre-Byzantine, pre-literate folk-singers of old, blows sky-high:

> Khlebnikov's language is as lay, as vernacular a language as if no monks, no Byzantium, no intelligentsia's culture had ever existed. It is an absolutely worldly and secular Russian language, heard for the first time since a written Russian culture has existed.[2]

1. "The struggle of Russian, that is of the secular, unwritten speech, whose words have grown from domestic roots, the tongue of the lay people, against the written language of the monks, with their Church-Slavonic, hostile, Byzantine literacy—this struggle is still to be sensed"—O. Mandel'stam, Notes on Poetry, (1923), in: D Davie and A Livingstone (eds), Modern Judgements: Pasternak, London 1969, p 67.
2. Ibid p 70.

Chapter Seventeen:

KHLEBNIKOV'S POETRY AS ANTI-LITERACY.

It is shown how many of the distinguishing characteristics
of Khlebnikov's poetic practice constitute aspects of his
struggle against the effects which the forms and conventions
of literacy have upon language.

KHLEBNIKOV'S ANTI-LITERACY manifests itself in virtually all
aspects of his poetic practice. We may see it in:

1. Khlebnikov's general reluctance to finish anything.
2. His repudiation of the dictionary.
3. His hostility to Moscow-standard Russian.
4. His attempts to reproduce or restore "pre-literate"
   language-forms (the language of children and pre-historic
   men).
5. His epic inclinations.
6. His hostility to the "fossilization" of language.
7. His championship of "transreason".
8. His emphasis on the voice.

These eight points may seem somewhat arbitrarily-chosen. In part
they overlap with each other, and probably other,   relevant
characteristics could be thought of. However they may provide a
convenient framework for our discussion. It would be to go beyond
the scope of this work to undertake any original or extensive
analysis of Khlebnikov's language. All that is proposed is that
a note be made of the essentials of what is involved in each of
the above points.

I. Khlebnikov's general reluctance to finish anything.

There is an element of finality about words which have been
written down. The spoken word floats away on the air as soon
as it has been uttered—other words replace it, and these, too,
may themselves be replaced. Spoken language is a continuous
process, a liquid stream rather than a "thing". A body of written
words is a "thing". If it is recalled that written language
originates historically in connection with official or state
purposes: to preserve laws, property-titles, monetary accounts

and so on, it will be appreciated how intrinsic to the nature of writing is its permanence, its fixity and its lack of ambiguity—as ideals if not always necessarily in practice. It would obviously seem absurd to sign an unfinished document, enforce a partly-written law or purchase an incomplete title to property. In other words there can be no question, in any of these cases, of dealing with a linguistic process. The written words must comprise a definite thing.[1]

A finished "thing" is, almost invariably, what Khlebnikov's writing is not. Khlebnikov loved new beginnings—and hated endings. Mandel'stam put it beautifully when he commented:

> ...each line is the beginning of a new poem.[2]

With Kruchenykh, Khlebnikov explicitly attacked the idea of finish and polish: in his view, true poets

> should write on their books: after reading, tear it up.[3]

Khlebnikov was so true to this impulse that he was incapable of correcting printers' proofs of his own work. As Mayakovsky explains:

> You couldn't let him have anything to do with proofs: he would cross out everything completely and give you an entirely new text.[4]

Khardzhiev writes:

> Khlebnikov felt that every verbal construction was a process, not an object.[5]

The activity of making sounds or communicating was the important thing, not the finished result. Writes Mayakovsky:

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1. In connection with all this, it would seem not accidental that in attacking "bookish" or "fossilized" language, Khlebnikov very often had the language of state officialdom and of commerce in mind. Khlebnikov thought of himself as leading "a troop of songs" into battle against the market-place"(see Mayakovsky's essay, V V Khlebnikov, in E J Brown, op cit p 86) See also his attack on street-signboard language (SP V p 225).
2. Quoted by Markov, The Literary Importance of Khlebnikov's Longer Poems, The Russian Review, Vol 19 No 4 Oct. 1960 p 353.
3. Slovo kak takovoe, quoted in: Markov, Russian Futurism p 130.
4. V V Khlebnikov, in: E J Brown, op cit p 83.
5. Quoted by Markov, The Longer Poems, p 32.

> Khlebnikov never completed any extensive and finished poetic
> works. The apparent finished state of his published pieces
> is most often the work of his friends' hands. We chose from
> the pile of his discarded notebooks those that seemed most
> valuable to us and we published them...
>   When bringing something in for publication, Khlebnikov
> usually remarked, "If something isn't right, change it."
> When he recited his poems he would sometimes break off in the
> middle of a sentence and indicate simply "et cetera."[1]

The idea of preserving his manuscripts apparently hardly occurred
to Khlebnikov who, according to Sergey Gorodetsky, would give them
to anyone who wanted them.[2] And even many of Khlebnikov's most
"finished" extensive works are deliberately composed of seemingly
unfinished fragments, like scattered pieces of mosaic. His _Zangezi_
was constructed, in his own words,

> ...from independent pieces, each with its own god, its own
> faith, and its own code.[3]

His "Children of the Otter" was composed of equally independent
fragments or, as he rather strangely termed them, "sails". A. Met-
chenko observed that "a mosaic quality is present even in Khleb-
nikov's larger works"[4], while Petrovsky called the poet's work "a
mosaic of his biography."[5] Khlebnikov's love of unfinishedness,
impermanence, transience and discontinuous movement was clearly
the corrollary of his dislike of everything which the act of
writing typically does to language. Perhaps nothing says more of
the "anti-literacy" of all this than the idea that poets should
write on their books: "After reading, tear it up." No instruction
could hit more surely at the central principle of literacy as
such.

1. Mayakovsky, _VVV Khlebnikov_, in: E J Brown, op cit p 83. Khleb-
   nikov wrote to Kruchenykh in 1913: "A work, 'Vila', is being
   sent to you, unfinished. You may, if you like, cross out or
   omit something, or, if you find it necessary, make correct-
   ions"—quoted by Markov, _The Longer Poems_, p 32.
2. S Gorodetsky, _Velemir Khlebnikov_, Izvestia, July 5 1922 (cited
   by Markov, _Longer Poems_, p 32).
3. SP II p 317.
4. Quoted by Markov, _The Longer Poems_, p 34.
5. Quoted by Markov, loc cit. Compare with Walton Litz on James
   Joyce: "The comparison between Joyce's method of composition
   and that of the mosaic workers...is strikingly appropriate.
   Joyce himself called the corrected galleys of _Ulysses_
   'mosaics'"—A Walton Litz, _The Art of James Joyce_, London 1961,
   p 12.

2. Khlebnikov's repudiation of the dictionary.

The development of writing leads to a certain standardization
of a language. The dictionary helps reduce the language to certain
norms of spelling, pronunciation, grammar and so on. A large num-
ber of colloquialisms, regional variants, slang terms and so on
are either ignored or set outside the normal bounds of the
written language. In this sense, literacy becomes a limitation.
Mandel'stam associates it with a small vocabulary, which is "a
sign that the speaker does not trust his native soil, and dare
not set his foot wherever he likes".[1] The literate social strata
dare not set foot outside the bounds of what is "literate" and
"correct": Mandel'stam comments that the Russian Symbolists
"have not more than five hundred words among them".[2] He contrasts
this with the "turbulent morphological flowering" of language in
the hands of Khlebnikov, who multiplies roots, evolves new words
out of existing ones and knows no limits to his vocabulary.[3]
Markov comments that "Khlebnikov's vocabulary is easily the rich-
est in Russian literature."[4] It is obvious that this is closely
associated with the fact that Khlebnikov rarely if ever thought
of using a dictionary, happily inventing his own words and mean-
ings as he went along. In Khlebnikov's work, all dictionary-
definitions, norms, literary correct usages and standards are
either disregarded or challenged in some way.

3. His hostility to Moscow-standard Russian.

This point will be discussed in the next chapter: it is relevant
to the theme of Khlebnikov's tendency to identify "bookish" lang-
uage with the state, opposing both almost as if they were one and
the same thing. We may note here, however, that most of the fut-
urists were "provincials", whose anarchistic rebellion always in-
cluded an element of revolt against the "correct" and "literary"
linguistic norms historically set by Moscow in opposition to the
regions. This was particularly the case with Khlebnikov, as Mar-

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1. Notes on Poetry, in: Davie and Livingstone (eds), op cit p 69.
2. Loc cit.
3. Ibid p 68.
4. Russian Futurism, p 300.

kov points out in his "The Longer Poems".

4. His use of "pre-historic" and "child-like" language.

The childhood of the race and the childhood of the individual can both be seen as pre-literate stages of existence. A wave of interest in what Nikolai Kulbin called "the art of children and prehistoric men"[1] accompanied the emergence of "primitivism" in Russian art and—as we noted in Chapter Five—it was largely as a poetic expression of this movement that Russian Futurism (and particularly its "Khlebnikovian" aspects) took shape. The generally "clumsy" and "illiterate" impression created by Larionov's or Goncharova's paintings was equally conveyed by much of Khlebnikov's language. Already in 1908, as Markov mentions, Khlebnikov was (e.g. in his ballad "Lyubovnik Yunony") rendering child-like effects through the use of stylistic and grammatical errors.[2] Pomorska cites the poet's "Komu skazatenki" (written a year or two later) in a similar context, and remarks that children's language was a source for Khlebnikov's zaum.[3] In 1913, Khlebnikov insisted that the editors of Sadok Sudei II print two poems by a thirteen-year-old Ukrainian girl, Militsa, withdrawing one of his own poems to give her space.[4] Khlebnikov was fascinated by the way in which literate language could be rendered illiterate—or by the way in which literature is distorted and transformed when children or uneducated people attempt to copy it. His use of folk-lore, as Markov explains, is

> not the "respectable" imitation of, or use of motifs
> from folk epics, lyrical songs, and fairy tales which
> is so widespread in Russian literature. It is, instead,
> an interest in the naive and "illiterate" imitation and
> distortion of literature, especially of romantic poetry,
> in numerous songs, ballads and poems which seldom
> attracted the attention of scholars, who to this day
> tend to dismiss them as having no artistic merit.[5]

The implications in terms of Khlebnikov's "anti-literacy" need no further elaboration.

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1. Quoted by Markov, Russian Futurism, p 35.
2. Markov, The Longer Poems, p 41.
3. Pomorska, op cit p 100.
4. Markov, Russian Futurism p 55.
5. Ibid p 36.

5. His epic inclinations.

The classic study of this aspect of Khlebnikov's style is, of course, Markov's "The Longer Poems." Khlebnikov's "epic" inclinations are shown in a number of characteristics which are reminiscent of the "Igor Tale", the Russian byliny and the Homeric tales. In keeping with the generally anonymous,oral collective or tribal origins and mode of existence of the great epic tales, the individualistic "I"-standpoint is generally lacking in epic poetry. Markov points to the same absence of an "I"-standpoint in Khlebnikov as one of the two basic "epic" features of his work.[1] The second such feature, for Markov, is the "mosaic" quality discussed above. The era of Symbolism,Markov notes, "brought the writing of long poems to a virtual standstill."[2] Most of the Symbolists' poems were short, highly-polished and finished expressions of a unified mood or theme. Khlebnikov yearned for works of immense size, and so could only regard shorter pieces as fragments of some larger unfinished whole. Jakobson notes that even

> his small poems create an impression of epic fragments, and Khlebnikov, without any effort, frequently integrated them into a larger poem.[3]

N. Gumilyev made a similar point in 1914:

> Many of his lines seem to be fragments of a never-written epic.[4]

And Sir Maurice Bowra wrote of "broken epics by Khlebnikov".[5] There is no need to summarise Markov's study here. It will suffice if we note that the great epics were orally composed and transmitted, and not in his epic tendencies, as in so many other respects, Khlebnikov was returning to the traditions of a pre-literate cultural era.

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1. Markov, The Longer Poems, p 34.
2. Ibid p 36.
3. Quoted by Markov, The Longer Poems, p· 34.
4. Quoted by Markov, loc cit.
5. Quoted by Markov, loc cit.

6. His hostility to the "fossilization" of language.

In Chapter Six, Khlebnikov's efforts were interpreted as a
struggle against 'byt' on the linguistic level—a struggle
against what Jakobson called the "hardening" of the forms of
language into a "stereotype". It is evident that it is in its
written form that language is most likely to seem "hardened"
in this way. The freezing or hardening of language seems to
operate on two levels. Firstly, as we have noted, the develop-
ment of writing tends to standardize a language, obliterating
dialect distinctions and, it would seem, slowing down the
process of linguistic evolution by providing/fixed points of ref-
erence or standards. Secondly, the freezing operates on the
"microscopic" level, since each individual utterance, once
written on paper, is in a sense preserved in a frozen state.

Khlebnikov fought against both these fossilizing tend-
encies. On the one hand, he insisted on re-animating the
evolutionary movement of language, producing new words and
meanings in accordance with the principles (as he saw them)
of Russian linguistic development. This is what he meant
when he wrote:

> Poetry should be constructed according to the laws of
> Darwin.[1]

Mandel'stam writes of Khlebnikov:

> He has plotted the transitional, intermediate paths in
> the development of the language, paths that historically
> it never took; they are taken solely in Khlebnikov, and
> made firm in his zaum, which is nothing other than those
> transitional forms which have not had time to acquire
> the crust of meaning that a rightly and justly developing
> language acquires.[2]

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1. SP V p 270.
2. Notes on Poetry, in: Davie and Livingstone, (eds), op. cit.,
   p 70. The translation here uses the word 'metalogy', which
   I have changed back to the Russian zaum. Compare Mandel'-
   stam's comment with Arnold Bennett's on Joyce: "He has ob-
   viously had a vision of the possible evolution of the Eng-
   lish tongue", Evening Standard, Aug. 8 1929; in Denning,
   op cit p 494.

On the other hand, as we have seen, Khlebnikov could relate
to language only as a process, not as a finished thing. The
very act of writing things down seemed to destroy his purpose,
fixing and finishing the process which he sought to present
in its continuous genesis and life. Oral language constantly
emanates from the future; but the lustre is lost as writing
fixes it in the present and past:

> When I noticed how old lines suddenly grew dull as their
> hidden content became that of the present day, I under-
> stood that the native land of creation is the future. It
> is from there that the wind of the word-gods blows.[1]

After a while, having been committed to paper, even the most
magical-seeming word-forms began to lose their magic effect.
Khlebnikov gives an example:

> During the time they were being written, the transrational
> words of the dying Ekhnaten, "Manch, manch!", from Ka,
> almost caused pain; I could not read them, seeing light-
> ning between them and myself; now they are nothing to me.
> Why, I don't know myself.[2]

Despite such feelings of failure, however, Khlebnikov was
astonishingly successful in creating a sense of continuous
genesis and movement in language even in its written form.
Confronted for the first time by a mass of Khlebnikov's man-
uscripts, Benedict Livshits was overcome by a peculiar sen-
sation, as if the anchors of his existence were being removed.
The two aspects of Khlebnikov's "de-fossilization" of language
are well indicated in Livshits' account of his feelings:

> ...the whole of my being seemed riveted by an apocalyptic
> horror. If the dolomites, purples and slates of a mountain
> range in the caucasus suddenly came alive before my eyes
> and—in the flaura and fauna of the mesozoic era—had
> stepped up to me from all sides, it would not have created
> a stronger impression.
> For I saw with my own eyes animated language.[3]

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1. Svoyasi, SP II p 8.
2. Ibid, p 9.
3. Polutoroglazyi strelets, Leningrad 1933, pp 46-7.

From one standpoint, reading Livshits' words, it might be
wondered what is so peculiar about "animated language"? One
may often speak of "animated conversation", and to describe
the result as "animated language" would not seem far-fetched
or very much out of the ordinary. But, of course, Livshits
was looking at manuscripts. In its written form, language is
not expected to be animated. The feelings which can be exper-
ienced when it is—feelings which Livshits describes—indicate
something of the scale and the nature of Khlebnikov's peculiar
achievement.

7. His championship of "transreason".

Human language has an "arbitrariness" about it which disting-
uishes it from the cries, screams, barks and other forms of
communication characteristic of the animal world. In human
language, there is no necessary relation between a given sound
and a given meaning—the connection is determined by social
convention alone. This is not true in the animal world: a cat's
purr or a gibbon's howl conveys the same message in the case
of all cats and all gibbons of the same genus, being determined
biologically rather than socially.

Khlebnikov's "transrational" principles assume that nothing
in human language is arbitrary. Every sound has an intrinsic
meaning which can be traced back to the Stone Age and is univ-
ersal to humanity as a species. The parallel with forms of
communication in the animal world is evident. That Khlebnikov
was to an extent conscious of this parallel is shown by the
fact that he treated real or imaginary animal cries in his
poetry as examples of "transreason."

The lack of any necessary or unalterable connection bet-
ween sound and meaning is in a sense as much a characteristic
of human language in its oral form as in its written state.
On the other hand, there is a kind of "animal" or "biological"

substratum to language when it is spoken rather than written.
Quaverings in the voice, alterations in pitch, breathing,
stammering and so on can be heard, and such factors can
convey states of feeling in a way which does tend to be univ-
ersal to all humans, biologically-determined and in that sense
"necessary" rather than "arbitrary". This aspect of language
is normally lost when the spoken word is translated into
writing. Yet it can be of considerable importance in the
communication of emotions, being an essential ingredient of,
for example, the song. In his "transrational language",
Khlebnikov was interested in "uniting people", appealing over
the head of "the government of intellect" direct to the
"stormy people of feelings".[1] He was attempting to bring to
the fore those aspects of language which exert a direct or
"magical" effect on the emotions and which are generally
missing in the "fossilized" written word.

In oral language, then, the relation between sound and
meaning seems more "necessary", less "arbitrary" than is the
case with the written word. Khlebnikov in his "transrational"
experiments takes the idea of a necessary sound-meaning
correlation to extremes. He insists that the very material,
the substance of "transrational language" is itself meaningful.
As Yuri Tynyanov puts it,

for him no sound is uncoloured by meaning.[2]

More specifically, his "transrational language" is based on
the idea that each consonant, as a sound, embodies a meaning
which is inseparable from it. In actual fact, so far as lang-
uage is distinctively human, this is not the case: the meaning
of a consonant depends on its position in a word and varies
according to convention. Although within a given language
there may be a certain tendency to associate particular con-
sonants with a number of consistent areas of meaning, in gen-
eral each consonant is meaningless in and of itself.

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1. SP V p 225.
2. On Khlebnikov, in E.J. Brown, op cit p 95.

The point is, however, that the "meaninglessness" of
individual consonants becomes fully apparent only with the
development of the phonetic alphabet and literacy. For when
language is known only as spoken language, there is no need
to fragment the sound-flow into isolated "letters". The
mind is conscious only of units which <u>do</u> possess meaning—
whole words and sequences of words. It is as a result of
phonetic literacy that language is thought of as consisting
of letters of the alphabet—i.e. intrinsically meaningless
units. Khlebnikov, in denying the meaninglessness of conson-
ants, was repudiating an important characteristic of phonetic
literacy which McLuhan describes as follows:

> The phonetic alphabet is a unique technology. There
> have been many kinds of writing, pictographic and syll-
> abic, but there is only one phonetic alphabet in which
> semantically meaningless letters are used to correspond
> to semantically meaningless sounds.[1]

Khlebnikov's consonant-meaning tables and theories, then, were
one more manifestation of his opposition to the principles
and linguistic effects of phonetic literacy as such.

These considerations by no means exhaust the anti-
literate implications of Khlebnikov's transrational language
experiments. However, the relationship of his <u>zaum</u> to child-
language, pre-historic language, magical incantations,
oral language in general and Radio as a return to the primacy
of the spoken word are all subjects dealt with elsewhere in
this work.

8. <u>His emphasis on the voice.</u>

It is obvious that literacy diminishes the role of the voice
in language. Virtually all commentators on Russian futurism
have recognized in it an attempt to restore to language the

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1. <u>Understanding Media</u>, p 83. Not only his consonant-meaning
   theories in particular, but Khlebnikov's insistence on the
   inseparability of sound and meaning in general can be seen
   as incompatible with the premises of the phonetic alphabet,
   of which McLuhan writes: "It alone is based on the abstract-
   ion of the sound of words from the meaning of words"—
   <u>Counter-Blast</u>, p 91.

ancient pre-eminence of sound, breath and the movement of
the organs of the voice. Referring to Mayakovsky's rhythms,
Chukovsky writes that they are:

> those we hear in the marketplace, on trolley cars, at
> meetings, the rhythm of shouts, conversations, speeches,
> squabbles, agitators' exhortations, swearing.[1]

In the manifesto (<u>Sadok Sudei II</u>) containing the Ukrainian
girl's poems a similar claim was made for Khlebnikov's
rhythms:

> We have smashed rhythms. Khlebnikov has introduced the
> poetic cadence of the living conversational word.[2]

Yuri Tynyanov writes of Khlebnikov's verse that it is

> modern man's intimate language, given as though
> accidentally overheard.[3]

Khardzhiev details Khlebnikov's frequent use of conversational
free verse, showing its close relationship to much of the
poetry of Mayakovsky.[4]

All of this, however, taken in isolation might give an
inaccurate impression of Khlebnikov's own language. It was by
no means his primary intention to give at all times a realistic
rendering of conversational or colloquial Russian. His lang-
uage is based only in part on the contemporary colloquial
word. Equally important is its basis in the oral tradition
of the Russian folk-epic and song, as has been noted. More-
over, Khlebnikov in many of his experiments was attempting
to convey not so much a "tape-recording" of everyday
colloquial language as the underlying patterns in accordance
with which the sound-combinations of speech evolve and
arrange themselves. Often he was so successful that the res-

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1. K. Chukovsky, <u>Akhmatova and Mayakovsky</u>, in E.J.Brown
   op cit p 50.
2. Quoted by Khardzhiev, op cit p 104.
3. <u>On Khlebnikov</u>, in E.J.Brown, op cit p 96.
4. Khardzhiev, op cit pp 105, 124.

ults sounded more Russian than Russian itself. Thus Mayak-
ovsky was amazed when Khlebnikov produced about five hundred
derivatives of the verb _lyubit'_ (to love), all of them,
according to Mayakovsky,

> absolutely accurate in their Russian construction,
> accurate and inevitable,

although strictly-speaking, of course, they were not "Russian"
at all.[1]

Writing about the language of Joyce's _Finnegans Wake_,
Max Eastman comments disparagingly that the reader exper-
iences nothing of the author's inner life or mind through it.
Asking (with reference to the author) "What is there that we
experience in common with him?", Eastman replies:

> A kind of elementary tongue dance, a feeling of the
> willingness to perform it.[2]

Other critics differ strongly, of course, but it would seem
undeniable that this "tongue-dance" element, while not the
only thing communicated by Joyce's language, represents one
of its important characteristics. In Khlebnikov's "transrat-
ional language", this same element of tongue-dance, present
to an extent in all poetry, likewise comes to the fore.
Shklovsky even seems to see it as the main source of enjoy-
ment in poetry in general:

> In the enjoyment of the meaningless 'transrational word'
> the articulatory side, a sui generis dancing of the
> speech organs, causes most of the enjoyment which poetry
> brings.[3]

In many of his experimental lines, Khlebnikov took this
tongue-dance (sometimes "tongue-twister") principle to
extremes:

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1. Quoted by Khardzhiev, op cit p 97.
2. _The Cult of Unintelligibility_, Harper's Magazine, April
   1929, in: Denning, op cit p 490.
3. _O poezii i zaumnom yazyke_, quoted by Pomorska, op cit
   pp 29-30.

Помирал морень, моримый морицей,
Верен в веримое верицы.
Умирал в морильях морень
Верень в вероча верни.
Обмирал морея морень.
Верен веритвам Вераны.
Приобмер моряжески морень
Верень верови верязя.[1]

Or again:

Мы чаруемся и чураемся.
Там чаруясь, здесь чураясь,
То чурахарь, то чарахарь,
Здесь чуриль, там чариль...

and so on—there is no need to quote the poem in full.[2]

In learning to read, a child is taught to scan the lines
more and more quickly, gradually eliminating the need to speak
aloud or even to whisper inwardly. Efficient literacy is
achieved when the words are "recognized" without delay, without
movement of the lips or vocal organs and without being heard.
If all that constitutes genuine reading, then the above lines
of Khlebnikov cannot be "read" at all. The lines cannot be
scanned, the eyes and mind are slowed down to a crawling pace
and it becomes almost impossible to avoid precisely the practice
which literacy is supposed to eliminate: namely, the practice
of moving the tongue or lips, speaking in a whisper or aloud.
Despite himself, the reader seems faced almost with a rebellion—
a re-assertion of his long-suppressed babbling tendencies and
childhood reading-habits—a temporary undoing of the work which
years of literacy have achieved.

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1. SP II p 44.
2. Ibid p 42.

Chapter Eighteen:

SOUND, TIME, LANGUAGE AND THE STATE.

The "political" implications of Khlebnikov's anti-literacy
are discussed in terms which help show the underlying links
between the various aspects of his world-view.

First, it is argued that his counterposition of a
"state of time" to the existing "states of space" is consis-
tent with his counterposition of oral language (arranged in
temporal sequence) to writing (arranged in space).

Secondly, it is suggested that Khlebnikov's association
of language-forms with state-forms is not devoid of a certain
logic. Writing developed historically largely to meet new
needs which emerged with the rise of the state. The state is
a territorial unit (a "state of space"). To preserve fixed
laws uniformly over wide areas of territory, a fixed, spatially
arranged, durable and transportable language-form was needed.
The written word, which met this need, may be thought to
embody certain of the specific characteristics of the state
as a historical form of social organization. In particular,
its ideal of fixity can be seen as an expression of the state's
ideal of the fixity of its laws and the permanence of its
power.

Khlebnikov fought against this form of language—and
saw his struggle against the "states of space" as a simple
extension of that fight. The language to which he was opposed,
Mandel'stam associates in particular with the state in its
Russian form. According to Mandel'stam, the Symbolists' lang-
uage was that of the Church and the State, while—in struggle
against it—Khlebnikov's language represented "the terrible
and boundless elements of the Russian language, not accomm-
odating themselves to any state or church forms." This was
one expression of the fact that Khlebnikov's Russian was the
oral form, "heard for the first time since a written Russian
culture has existed."

Opposing all "states of space" and harking back to the
stateless, tribal past of Russia and mankind, Khlebnikov's
linguistic efforts were directed towards restoring what he
thought of as the archaic unity of the human race. But this
restoration was to be accomplished through a revolution in
which "inventions" such as Radio were to play a crucial part.
The result would be a "state of time". Power would be in the
hands no longer of the language-form and "reason" of the state,
but of a transrational language of electronically-transmitted
sounds, expressing the will of humanity and of "the starry
sky".

"LIKE BLOK", writes Mandel'stam,

> Khlebnikov thought of language as a state, but not at
> all one in space—not geographical—but in time.[1]

Khlebnikov's idea of the "state of time", for all its apparent
extraordinariness, does have a certain logic in terms of the
struggle for the spoken word. It is a fairly elementary obser-
vation to note that spoken language is composed of elements
related in a temporal sequence. Its dimension is time, while
(since the words, ideally, exist "everywhere at once") it has
no real spatial position or dimensions at all. The ideal dim-
ensions of written language are just the opposite. The whole
point of written language is that it is permanent: its elements
exist in a durable form, related to each other not in time but
in space.[2]

The association of writing with the territorial state is
also not without foundation. In a small tribal village, there
is no real "space": space is being penetrated instantaneously
and continuously by voices, and people respond to each other
simultaneously and reciprocally almost all the time. Obviously,
this is never entirely the case: voices do not carry very far,
and there is always plenty of travelling and moving about. But
to the extent that "space" as civilized man experiences it does
not exist, it would perhaps not be too far-fetched to call
such a village a little "state of time". This is not the place

1. Burya i Natisk, Osip Mandel'stam, Collected Works in 3 vols.,
   edited by G P Struve and B A Filipoff, Vol 2, p 390.
2. El Lissitzy: "...we have two dimensions for the word. As a
   sound it is a function of time, and as a representation it is
   a function of space"—Lissitzky-Kuppers, op cit p 357.
   Joyce's Stephen Dedalus: "An aesthetic image is presented to
   us either in space or in time. What is audible is presented
   in time, what is visible is presented in space"—A Portrait
   of the Artist, quoted in A W Litz, The Art of James Joyce,
   London 1961, p 55.

for a historical analysis of the origins of the world's various systems of writing. But we may at least note the fact that the written word arises historically to meet the needs of the state. For the territorial state, the penetration of distances is a real problem. Since there can be no instantaneous communication over such spaces, the problem can only be solved by a durable, changeless form of language which is the same when it arrives at its destination as it was at its point of departure. The written word on papyrus—which is not only durable but transportable—was for long the best answer to this problem.[1] The changelessness or durability of writing is a feature not only of this communications-medium. It also becomes, from the beginning, a fundamental principle of the state itself, expressed in the fixity of its laws, its property-relationships and so on (all of which must be recorded in writing). The ideal of fixity is, of course, never fully achieved. If it were to be, then nothing would ever happen. All life would take place in a process of endlessly-repeated obedience to pre-existing laws and written words. It would be the reign of 'byt' carried to its ultimate extreme. But although this ideal is never actually reached—conflicts always break out, laws have to be re-written and so on—to the extent that changelessness is achieved, time in a sense ceases to exist. And to that extent, the state is a pure "state of space".

Khlebnikov's language, we have seen, evolved in a process of continuation of—and reaction against—the language-use of the Symbolists. In a discussion of Khlebnikov's language, Osip Mandel'stam describes Blok's language as "the language of the state."[2] In his view it is a classic expression of that 'liter-

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1. McLuhan cites The Bias of Communication by Harold Innis in this connection. War and Peace etc., p 26.
2. Burya i Natisk, in: Struve and Filipoff (eds) op cit Vol 2 p 390.

acy' in Russian history against which Khlebnikov rebelled. Blok's language, says Mandel'stam, is priestly, foreign. Its origins can be traced back to the Byzantine introduction of Christianity into Russia and the origins of the Muscovite state. It imposes itself externally against the multiplicity of provincialisms and oral traditions of real Russian culture, blotting them out and in a sense harking back thereby to the founding of the Russian state. Blok's

> tendency to centralize verse and language reminds one of the flair for statesmanship of the Moscow historic activists. It is a strong, stern hand in relation to provincialism of any kind: everything is subordinated to Moscow—that is, in this case, to the historically-conditioned poetry of the traditional language of the state official.[1]

To Mandel'stam, this intimate association of language and state is an aspect of literacy, and is therefore particularly characteristic of the West. In his view,

> the cultures and histories of the West lock up the language from outside, enclose it with walls of state and church, and saturate themselves with it...[2]

But Russia stands on the Eastern outposts of Europe, where literacy has a far shallower foothold:

> Russian culture and history is washed and encircled on all sides by the terrible and boundless elements of the Russian language, not accommodating themselves to any state or church forms.[3]

Russian Futurism represents the invasion of these "terrible and boundless elements" which have been kept at bay for so long:

> Futurism is expressed all in regionalisms, in provincial militancy, in a folkloristic, ethnographical multiplicity of tongues.[4]

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1. _Burya i Natisk_, ibid p 390.
2. _O prirode slova_, in: ibid p 287.
3. Loc cit.
4. _Burya i Natisk_, p 390.

The real Russian elemental language had always been represented
by Russia's first and greatest epic poem—

> the living, graphic speech of the 'Lay of Igor's Campaign',
> through and through secular, temporal and Russian at every
> turn...[1]

And when Velimir Khlebnikov, concludes Mandel'stam,

> a contemporary Russian writer, plunges us into that
> same thicket of Russian word-roots, into that etymolog-
> ical night, kind to the heart and intellect of the wise
> reader, there lives that same Russian literature, the
> literature of the 'Lay of Igor's Campaign'.[2]

Mandel'stam's position, then, is that Khlebnikov's struggle
was against a language-form that was written, priestly, foreign,
centralized and intimately associated with the functions of the
state. Khlebnikov's own language was anti-literate, secular,
through-and-through Russian, decentralized and inimical to the
existence of the state. This analysis is central to an under-
standing of Khlebnikov, and is confirmed by many of Khlebnikov's
own statements, as well as in his poetry.

> Khlebnikov wanted to inhabit a state of sounds:

> We are going to the sounds inhabited by people.
> A town of logs of sound,
> A town of stones of sound,
> There I lead you
> To the town whose food you can hear,
> The town where people eat sounds, let us go,
> Where there are logs of sound,
> Logs of laughter,
> And streets of song...

> **Enough of idly strumming**
> **Strings with one's hand;**
> **Enough of catching and clinging**
> **To the sounds, hungry-eared,**
> **To listen to them.**
> **It is time mankind inhabited**
> **The state of sounds.**[3]

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1. O Prirode Slova, ibid p 287.
2. Loc cit.
3. SP V pp 88-89.

The entire Earth was to be treated as a kind of vibrating musical instrument:

> Treat the Earth as a resonant plate, and its capital cities as dust nodules gathered in still waves.[1]

Khlebnikov saw the future as a return, on a new technological basis, to the tribal or stateless condition of man's past. He anticipated by half a century McLuhan's idea of "an electric return to the tribal paleolithic age":

> You will recall that a resonant string of tribes has joined together Tokyo, Moscow and Singapore.[2]

He saw the events of his age as a sudden "shift" from the prehistoric past to the electronic future, a difficult movement like a jump across railway-points—and a movement which it was the task of his world government to guide. As he wrote in his "Declaration of the Presidents of the Terrestrial Sphere" early in 1917:

> Our heavy task is to be railway-pointsmen at the junction of Past and Future.[3]

The "shift" to be engineered was a kind of short-circuit of the historical process: a sudden meeting of the two ends of time, through a by-passing or telescoping of the events of the intervening period, so that it was almost as if the entire history of literacy and the civilized state had (to quote Mandel'stam) "never existed".[4]

A feeling that "the ends of time" are being joined permeates almost all Khlebnikov's work. The whole history of the human race is as it were "telescoped" and seen as if "in a flash", the most diverse periods being almost violently juxtaposed.[5] Per-

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1. SP V p 161.
2. SP V p 313.
3. SP V p 163.
4. Notes on Poetry, in: Davie and Livingstone (eds) op cit p 70.
5. Exactly this feature is noted by S Gilbert in Finnegans Wake: "the dimensions of time and space are telescoped and we see, like gods or as in a dream, all history in the flash of a moment"—Denning op cit p 539. Joyce, too, joins the ends of time: he "chews thoughts of the beginning and the end of creation"—Unsigned Notice, Times Lit., Supp't., 25.1. 1941; Denning, op cit p 753. J P Bishop writes that in Finnegans Wake "is the past and the future of mankind"—ibid p 738.

haps the best example is provided by "The Otter's Children", in which, (among other things), a mammoth-hunt is juxtaposed with a Futurist public stage-performance.[1] This work, composed of "sails" each of which represents a fragment of life from a different age, was the one which came, perhaps, closest to realizing Khlebnikov's dream (noted earlier) of creating a novel which broke through the normal laws of time.[2]

For Khlebnikov, the events of 1917 were, then, an abrupt uniting of far-removed times—the future and the pre-historic past. Hence in his poetic works, the revolution, besides being pictured as a leap into the future, was depicted, (as one critic has put it),

> as a breaking in of the primeval world, as a new bubbling forth of the prehistoric springs of life.[3]

In this way, the culture of literacy and the "states of space" were seen as being attacked from both ends. The rule of "the present" was being attacked by the combined forces of past and future.

For Khlebnikov, this meant that the "conception of Time" was gaining the upper hand over "the conception of Space." The present—insofar as it was a manifestation of changelessness and 'byt'—had been a frozen, static world, a world of territorial states and of existence in space. Its language-form had been "bookish" or "fossilized" or "congealed" language—made of "words no longer beating with the waves of language" —which divided people territorially from each other. Such language (whose words

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1. _Choix de Poemes_, p 110.
2. _Neizd._ P p 358.
3. Holthusen, _Twentieth Century Russian Literature_, N Y 1972, p 78
   Although Khlebnikov was probably not aware of it, something
   similar was also the view of the Bolsheviks and of Marx and
   Engels. See the draft of Marx's letter to Vera Zasulich, where
   (in a discussion on a survival of "primitive communism"—the
   primitive Russian peasant commune) he wrote: "To save the
   Russian commune, there must be a Russian revolution" and des-
   cribed the conditions under which "this commune will soon bec-
   ome an element that regenerates Russian society"—D McLellan,
   The Thought of K Marx, London 1971, p 137. See also Engels:
   Anti-Duhring, Foreign Languages Publishing Hse., M 1959, esp.
   p 477 and Lenin: _Philosophical Notebooks_, Coll. Works M 1961
   Vol 38, esp. p 222.

were "died-out" and "non-existent") had been made for "suicides and cripples".[1] It did not serve to penetrate or conquer the distances and spaces separating people from one another, but, on the contrary, enormously increased them:

> Who would travel from Moscow to Kiev via New York?
> And yet is there one line of contemporary bookish
> language which is free of such detours?[2]

But with the development of "the study of lightning", the coming of "radio-telegraph" and "Radio", the "language of lightning" and the "gift of spark-speech"—technological inventions which Khlebnikov's sound-experiments and "trans-rational language" were designed to match—communication could take place "in the twinkling of an eye."[3] Inventors—people who accelerated the historical time-flow, people who hungered and fought for time—could begin to challenge proprietors or acquirers—people who froze the time-flow, people who owned landed estates, who defended "frontiers" and hungered only for the parcelled-out spaces of the Terrestrial Sphere. These spaces were now being shot through and through by "people-rays". Futurists communicating by radio-telegraph planned to occupy the estates of "people of space" and encircle the globe like waves. The ground was being pulled—literally—from under the feet of the "people of space". For all the world's space was being shrunk into a tiny ball:

> Nobody will deny that I carry your terrestrial globe
> on the little finger of my hand.[4]

Consequently, terrestrial ownership or "property" was becoming an absurdity, an impossibility. The right to space was being

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1. Neizd P p 437. Khlebnikov's lines about "suicides and cripples", written in 1912, are paralleled in Mayakovsky's first play, "Vladimir Mayakovsky, A Tragedy", whose premier was held on December 2, 1913. Here a "chorus of cripples" plays an important role, as does the theme of suicide. See: Stahlberger, op cit, Chapter One (pp 20-43).
2. SP V p 228.
3. Slovo Kak Takovoe.
4. SP IV p 114. Khlebnikov is here anticipating McLuhan's "Global Village" slogan; but of course it was also in a sense anticipated by Apollinaire and others (see above, chapter Seven).

undermined and replaced by something else. Khlebnikov "foresaw" all this, as he wrote in 1916:

> I foresaw the destruction of the right to property. Space is conquered, and the grass of spaces wilts. The right to property is changed to the creative battle for time.[1]

* * * * *

"If we sit and talk in a dark room", writes McLuhan,

> words suddenly acquire new meanings and different textures... All those gestural qualities that the printed page strips from language come back in the dark, and on the radio.[2]

In Khlebnikov's "state of sounds", in accordance with the corresponding emphasis on the ear as opposed to the eye, everything is in a sense "dark", although it is a darkness in which the stars shine, and the kind of darkness associated with evening fire-light and songs. Khlebnikov links many things with this vibrant darkness: it is the "star-world", it is the world of night-time and of dreams, it is the world of the pre historic past and also of the future. All of these are in a sense one, and they all meet in the idea of "transreason", which corresponds to the deeper, more primitive, more essential and universal layers of consciousness or of the subconscious mind, as opposed to the every-day rational or "daylight" layers.

In agreement with McLuhan's comment on the "new meanings" of words which emerge in the dark, Khlebnikov argues that a kind of "darkness" is required if the "transrational" meanings of words are to be brought out and experienced. The word, he writes, has a double aspect:

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1. The word for "property" Khlebnikov uses here is <u>imenie</u>— "estate" or "landed property"—which thus in itself incorporates the idea of ownership of space or territory:

   "Я провидел перелом права имения. Пространство завоевано, и трава пространств завянет. Право имения перейдет на творческий бой за время." —SP V p 132.

2. <u>Understanding Media</u>, p 303.

> One could think of its daily sunlit sense concealing
> a nocturnal, starry one underneath. For the everyday
> meaning of the word—whatever it is—blots out its
> other meanings, which disappear just as the stars of
> the night vanish in daytime.[1]

However, in sleep and drowsiness, when the demands of daily
business and the intellect relent, these "star-world" meanings
re-assert themselves:

> ...life's night allows one to see the weak meanings
> of words as one sees the weak visions of the night-
> time.[2]

In Chapter Nine, the "pole of incomprehensibility" in
the idea of "transrational language" was associated with the
"objectlessness" of Cubist painting, the "reduction to zero"
of art, the idea of the Bolshevik revolution and the idea of
the semantic incompatibility of the "languages" of the future
and present. The incomprehensibility of the "language of the
future" emphasized the gap separating this future from the
present world. Khlebnikov's "transrational language", we noted,
was often supposed to be the language of animals and children,
and these—like prehistoric men—represent realms of exper-
ience more or less incomprehensible to the literate civilization
to which Khlebnikov was opposed.

Now if it is accepted that the instincts (men's link with
the animal world), the ways of childhood and (perhaps) some of
the thought-processes of primitive man re-appear to a certain
extent in dreams, it needs no special insight to grasp how
for Khlebnikov the language of "transreason" became associated
also with the language of dreams. The world of dreams is a
world of darkness beyond reach, by and large, of the state.
As the mind slips into a dream, the "sunlit" and "rational"
world—the world of literacy, logic, everyday business and
officialdom—is reduced to zero. In its place there opens up
a new world of freedom from the dimensions of time and space.

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1. SP V p 229.
2. Ibid p 230.

If the world of dreams lies beyond the reach of literacy
and the state, the opposite is the case in relation to the
"governing" layers of the mind. Khlebnikov sees the "sunlit"
or "rational", everyday or literate layers of language and con-
sciousness as "ruling over" the starry, transrational layers
just as governments rule over people. His "transrational lang-
.uage" is designed to reach the "people" as if "over the heads"
of the "government":

> If one may distinguish, within the soul, the government
> of intellect from the stormy people of feelings, then
> charms and transrational language are an appeal over the
> head of the government straight to the people of feelings,
> a direct call to the twilight regions of the soul or the
> highest point of popular sovereignty in the life of the
> word...[1]

This, of course, throws important new light on Mandel'stam's
comment that Khlebnikov sees language as a state. Two kinds of
state are involved—as Mandel'stam pointed out. But Khlebnikov
sees the struggle between these two as in a curious way parall-
eling, on the one hand, the conflict between peoples and govern-
ments, and, on the other, the conflict between the intellect
and the deeper, "twilight" or "star-world" layers of the mind.

Under the conditions of "the present", Khlebnikov is aware,
it is the governing or intellectual layers of the mind which
have the upper hand. But this, for him, is precisely what is
wrong with the world: these governing layers represent the
rule of the "states of space". The language of these mental
layers is not "self-governing". It is governed from outside,
serving "reason" and hence the "governments" as opposed to the
"people" of the Terrestrial Sphere. The way in which Khlebnikov
derives his political conclusions from linguistic premises is
perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in the following lines,
written in 1913, where the poet explains the implications, for
him, of the slogan of the "self-sufficient word":

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1. SP V p 225.

> We teach: the word governs the brain, the brain—the
> hands, the hands—kingdoms. The bridge to a self-gov-
> erning kingdom—is a self-governing speech.[1]

Under the conditions of the present, self-sufficient language—
the language of the "twilight" mental layers—is ruled by the
"congealed", "bookish", "rational" language of the "daylight"
waking mind. The "political" differences between these two
forms of language have been noted already: one divides people,
the other unites them; one corresponds to the "states of
space", the other to the "state of time"; one corresponds to
the world's "governments", the other to its "people"; one
corresponds to "the present", the other to the future and the
distant past. Another difference is suggested when Khlebnikov
states his own preference as between these two forms or realms
of existence of the word:

> I would much rather
> Gaze at the stars
> Than sign a death-warrant...
> That is why I will never,
> Never,
> Be a ruler![2]

The "bookish" language of "states of space" is also the lang-
uage of the bureaucrat who inflicts death with his pen. A diff-
erent scale of violence through language—the "historical
violence" perpetrated over centuries against the entire con-
tinent and culture of Asia—seems to be what Khlebnikov tries
to depict in another poem through an extraordinary extended
metaphor. Here again the state is identified with language—
in this case, with print—the inner ruptures and fissures
through society being significantly "confused" with the effects
on paper of the pressures of a printing press and its letters:

> In that book you may turn pages
> Printed by the pressure of seas,
> Nations gleaming like inks in the night.

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1. SP V p 188.
2. SP III p 297.

> The execution of a Tsar forms an angry exclamation mark,
> Or an army's victory, a comma.
> In the margin are the dots of anger of the peoples' eyes,
> Their rage unrestrained.
> And a fissure through the centuries forms a bracket.[1]

Khlebnikov believed that mankind had endured the warring, violent language of the state for too long:

> Too often has the pen of war been dipped into the ink-well of mankind.[2]

Khlebnikov's idea that "bookish-fossilized", "rational" language—linked with the state—serves to oppress mankind is a notion which may not be quite so peculiar or far-fetched as it at first may appear. To the extent that Khlebnikov's target is literacy (and this is very largely the case, as we have seen), the idea seems to approximate quite closely to the conclusion of the structural anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss, that

> the primary function of writing, as a means of communication, is to facilitate the enslavement of other human beings.[3]

It was only with the invention of writing that the state and bureaucracy could come into existence, and, in more recent times, it has only been with the extension of literacy that the state has been able to exert its control over each individual citizen:

> The struggle against illiteracy is indistinguishable, at times, from the increased powers exerted over the individual citizen by the central authority.[4]

The fact that Khlebnikov often identifies what he calls "reason" as the enemy does not lessen the relevance of this. McLuhan remarks that it is a general characteristic of thought in the West that "we have confused reason with literacy..."[5] And—to

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1. SP III p 122. The translation here (unlike others in this work) is a little 'loose' and simplified (the original begins in the present tense and continues in the past).
2. SP V p 266.
3. A World on the Wane (trans J Russell) London 1961 p 292.
4. Ibid p 293.
5. Understanding Media, p 15.

take the question of Khlebnikov's championship of the "We" as
against the "I"-standpoint in language—this, too, may be con-
sistent/his "anti-literacy". We have already noted how the
written word allows a certain independence to the "I", isolating
it from the more "normal" process of immediate reciprocity
characteristic of language. Pomorska notes how the Formalist
"Opoyaz" scholars based themselves in part on the work of
Lev Shcherba, whose most important innovation in stylistic
studies was his differentiation between <u>oral style</u> and <u>written
style</u>. On the level of discourse, writes Pomorska,

> these two different styles correspond to the structures
> of monologue and dialogue. Monologue is a tendency
> proper to a written style, whereas oral speech is prim-
> arily oriented towards dialogue.[1]

This takes us back to our earlier discussion of Khlebnikov's
break with the Symbolists. His revolt against his earlier
"teachers" was not only a revolt against their excessive "lit-
eracy"—it was also a revolt against the way in which their
"I" always "out-weighed" (as Mandel'stam put it) the "not-I".
But if this tendency towards "monologue" is actually "proper to
a written style", then the two things against which Khlebnikov
was rebelling were in a sense one and the same. Over-literate
language—"bookish-fossilized" or "rational" language as Khleb-
nikov called it—assumes the monologue rather than the dial-
ogue as its form of discourse. Or, as Khlebnikov put it more
simply, it "divides people".

The language which was to "unite people" was conceived by
Khlebnikov in a number of rather different forms. In a passage
quoted in chapter ten, Khlebnikov even conceived it as a
"written language", whose "silent, graphic signs" would unite
the multitongues of humanity.[2] Khlebnikov seems very confused
here, however, because in the same article ("Artists of the
World") he makes it clear that what he is actually thinking of
is his old idea of the universal meanings of consonant-sounds,
which he <u>represents</u> with letters of the alphabet—i.e. with his

1. Pomorska op cit p 17.
2. SP V pp 216-17.

"silent graphic signs". He is thinking, as he puts it, of the
"elementary particles of language—the sounds of the alphabet",
and of the theory, developed by him, that "the first sound of
a word is like the President of a society, directing all the
multiplicity of the word's sounds."[1] It is clear that, for all
his theoretical talk of a "silent" and "written" language,
Khlebnikov is actually still haunted by his old and central
obsession with a universal language of pure sounds.

In his 1915-1916 "propositions", Khlebnikov presented his
"universal language" as a "language of numbers". After des-
cribing his proposal to assign numbers to all the world's
thoughts, he writes:

That is the first international language.[2]

It seems here, however, that Khlebnikov is being a little
ironical. The reduction of language to such a hum-drum, official
"rational" form—a form deprived of sound-content and used
only to communicate abstract concepts—was something which
Khlebnikov deplored, and which he saw as far too characteristic
of language already. Of his "language of numbers" idea, Khleb-
nikov writes

It has already been partially introduced in law-codes.[3]

He was referring to the procedures of case-law, where already
it was possible to refer to a mass of legal precedents and
"thoughts" without going through them all, simply referring
to the cases in question. Khlebnikov thought that this ultra-
"rational" use of language might as well be carried to its
ultimate absurdity: assign numbers to all the world's thoughts,
and to the great speeches made by Cicero, Cato and others in
the past, and, forgetting about language, just hold up boards
with the relevant numbers on them.[4] This would ease the ears
and save a lot of effort:

'Languages will remain for art and become free of their
offensive burden. The ear is tired.[5]

1. SP V p 219.
2. Ibid p 158.   3. Loc cit.   4. Loc cit.   5. Loc cit.

The intended irony in all this is obvious.

What Khlebnikov opposed in language was precisely the tendency caricatured in his "language of numbers" idea: the use of language only to transmit ready-formed concepts, in such a way that nothing—neither the sounds of words, their associated emotional values or anything else—is actually experienced at all. This is what Khlebnikov meant when he wrote:

> The desire to "rationally"—as opposed to transrationally— understand the word has led to the destruction of any artistic relationship with the word. I cite this by way of warning.[1]

To Khlebnikov, a language capable of "uniting people" would have to penetrate beyond intellect to the realm of feelings.[2] It was inconceivable that a purely rational "language of numbers" could do this. That is why, in all Khlebnikov's work, the theme is returned to again and again that a transrational language will be necessary to unite the human race.

But there is yet another form in which Khlebnikov's "universal language" idea appears. This is the "gift of spark-speech", the "language of lightning"—the "Radio of the future". The idea of modern science and technology as "uniting mankind" was sometimes conceived in more general terms, as when Khlebnikov wrote:

> The people's international we conceive through the international of the ideas of science.[3]

But, when it came to a specific invention, it was always Radio (or, earlier, radio-telegraphy) to which Khlebnikov most en-

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1. SP II p 10.
2. SP V p 225. See also ibid p 235: "Transrational language— means that which is beyond the limits of reason."
3. SP V p 265 (1921).

thusiastically turned. If Khlebnikov did not actually identify
the "language of lightning" with his "transrational language",
he certainly seemed to see parallels between the two. The Radio—
like transrational language—was seen as exercizing magical
powers. It was a "great sorcerer and ensorceler", envelpping the
globe in its spell. The Radio was, secondly, the "main tree of
consciousness." In this it resembled "the wisdom of language",
which Khlebnikov saw as the single consciousness of the globe:

Its "I" coincides with the life of the world.[1]

The Radio was, thirdly, like "a timid bird", its outpourings
resembling "the spring flight of birds". Khlebnikov associated
Radio with his dream of a humanity which would develop wings
and fly: the "gift of spark-speech" was linked with "air-sailing."
All this made Radio resemble transrational language in another
way, for this new language, too, was associated with Khlebnikov's
dream of a human race which could "fly". In Ladomir he calls:

Лети, созвездье человечье,
Все дальше, далее в простор,
И перелей земли наречья
В единый смертных разговор.[2]

Conversely, man's existing system of languages—fossilized, viol-
ent and divisive—is seen as an evolutionary handicap. It is
like the vestigial claw on the wing of a reptilian fossil-bird—
a useless, burdensome survival from an aggressive past, weighing
upon humanity's wings and hindering its flight:

Destruction of languages which resemble the claw on the
wing... Languages on contemporary humanity—are the claw
on the wing of birds: a useless residue of antiquity, a
claw of former times.[3]

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1. SP V p 321.
2. IS p 219.
3. SP V p 265.

As a source of magic, as the seat of the world's conscious-
ness and as a means of spiritual "flight"—in these three forms,
Radio was seen, then, as in a sense "paralleling" the functions
of Khlebnikov's "transrational" or "universal" language. One
could cite other parallels—the "instantaneous", space-conquering
nature of the two communications-forms, their shared "oral"
bias and so on. One could even refer to a certain "incompreh-
ensibility" common to both, at least if McLuhan's remarks on
the electronic media are to be believed:

> Radio and TV aren't audio-visual aids to enhance or to
> popularize previous forms of experience. They are new
> languages...
>
> It is easy to see now that language has always been a
> mass medium even as the new media are new languages
> having each its own unique grammar and aesthetic modes...
>
> NOBODY yet knows the languages inherent in the new tech-
> nological culture; we are all technological idiots in
> terms of the new situation.[1]

Whether the "idiot" Khlebnikov was, in creating his "incom-
prehensible" language, sensing in some way this impending impact
of Radio is perhaps an interesting thought, but we have no
direct evidence that the poet himself consciously thought of
the new media as incomprehensible languages.

However, perhaps the most important parallel which Khleb-
nikov saw between Radio and his linguistic projects was that
both were to unite humanity. In 1920, as we have noted, Khleb-
nikov wrote of his "future language of the universe in embryo":

> It alone can unite people.[2]

In 1921, however, he wrote that something else could "unite
people". Almost as if his "universal language" were now unecc-
essary, he wrote that it was Radio which

> will forge the unbroken links of the world soul and fuse
> together all mankind.[3]

Clearly, he could only have said this if he had thought that the
parallel between Radio-communications and his own linguistic

1. Counter-Blast, pp 133, 84 and 16 respectively.
2. SP V p 236.
3. SP IV p 293.

efforts was close.

Khlebnikov's vision of a "universal language" took, then, a number of different forms. Among these forms, however, some appear to have been less seriously-considered than others. Among these were the ultra-"rational" idea of a "language of numbers", and the notion—suggested in one passage of Khlebnikov's "Artists of the World"—of a universal language of "silent, graphic signs". In the overwhelming majority of Khlebnikov's statements on the subject, his "universal language" is identified with his "transrational" linguistic experiments, and in these the emphasis is on the "magic" and the supposedly intrinsic meaningfulness of <u>sounds</u>. The various attributes of Khlebnikov's "transrational language"—and of his language-use in general—can be interpreted, as we have seen, as in large part the embodiment of a revolt against literacy. This can be seen—as Mandel'stam suggests—as the central thrust of Khlebnikov's linguistic efforts, and in this we can see an important parallel with the effects of the invention of Radio, a parallel of which Khlebnikov was to a significant degree aware.

In opposing literacy—or in opposing a certain sort of language—Khlebnikov saw himself as opposing a certain kind of state, as we have seen. His "transrational" attempts were designed to secure a transfer of power—from governments to people, from intellect to feelings. Under existing circumstances, as Khlebnikov saw it, it was the daylight world, the world of everyday business, of the state and of the intellect—it was this world which held all real power. The "twilight" world or "star-world"—the world of childhood, of tribal man, of dreams and of the innermost realms of feeling—was suppressed, along with the Asian or primitive tribal areas of the globe and the peoples of the world. In this light, a large number of implications—psychological, historical, linguistic and geographical— were attached to Khlebnikov's "political" aim, which was, perhaps, the most fundamental of all his aims:

Accomplish by degrees a surrender of power to the starry
sky...[1]

To Khlebnikov, to surrender power to "the starry sky" was equally
to surrender it to "a self-governing speech". There was no con-
tradiction, in other words, between his "starry sky" demand and
his words, quoted earlier, about a "self-governing kingdom"
ruled by a "self-governing speech".[2] For the language of the
star-world was, as we have seen, none other than Khlebnikov's
"transrational language", the language of words in their "noc-
turnal, starry" sense.[3] To surrender power to the starry sky
meant, for Khlebnikov, to allow the world to be governed, as it
were, "from within", in accordance with the inner will of
humanity—a will (expressed in dreams and poetry alike) by which
man is linked with his childhood, with his prehistoric ancestry
and with his roots in the natural universe with its light-waves
and stars. As one of his "Tasks of the Presidents of the Terres-
trial Sphere", Khlebnikov listed the re-discovery of man's
"white, glistening root", remarking that

> in realizing mankind, it is necessary not to sever his
> ties in the universe and in the will, in which—as in a
> chalice—humanity was born.[4]

Khlebnikov saw Radio as an instrument of this "will": it was
humanity's "ears" and "eyes", and a manifestation of the "life
of the spirit", as we have seen. Identifying "inventions" with
his own poetic work, Khlebnikov saw the electronics revolution
more generally as stemming from the inner world of the human
spirit, while at the same time it returned "the light-ray" of
humanity in a direct way into contact with the light-rays of
the suns and stars of the universe. In this way the inner world
of man's dreams was linked with the infinities of the universe,
just as man's future was linked with his prehistoric or even
cosmic past. The extremes of space—inner and outer—were joined,
just as were the ends of time. A sense of these mind-boggling

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1. SP V p 161.
2. SP V p 188.
3. SP V p 229.
4. SP V pp 265-6.

connections is conveyed when Khlebnikov describes the "graph"
(the "path of the point" along the graph-paper) of his "ray of
fate", the ray which links everything with everything else, and
which he calls "Gamma Budetlyanina".* The hostility of this ray
to "states of space" (an inevitable incompatibility, since the
ray's laws cut through states and connect everything, while the
states divide people) adds yet another dimension to the complexity
of Khlebnikov's thought:

> It should be remembered that man is in the final analysis
> lightning, that there exists the great lightning of the
> human race—and the lightning of the earth. Is it surprising
> that people, even without knowing each other, should be
> connected one with the other by means of precise laws?
> ...Precise laws cut freely through states without noticing
> them, just as X-rays penetrate through muscles and give a
> picture of the bones: they strip mankind of the rags of
> state and give him another fabric—the starry sky...
> To understand the will of the stars means to unfurl before
> the eyes all the scrolls of genuine freedom. They hang above
> us only in the black night, these boards of future laws,
> and doesn't the point's path follow this course in order to
> avoid the wire of states among the eternal stars and hearing
> of humanity? Let the will of the stars be wireless. One of
> the routes—is Gamma Budetlyanina, with one end stirring the
> sky and the other hidden in the throbbings of the heart.[1]

As the great "ray" is uncovered, writes Khlebnikov, human divis-
ions and states vanish into nothingness:

> ...the conception of peoples and states disappears, and
> there remains a single humanity, all of whose points are
> harmoniously connected.[2]

This was written in 1920, but early in 1917—inspired by the
outbreak of the February revolution—Khlebnikov, in his letter
to Petnikov, had already put forward the basic ideas. The mission
of the Futurists (or rather, of those who followed him among the
Futurists) was, he had said, to replace states with a government
of poets, territorial divisions with waves of sound embracing the
globe, war and cannon-fire with the vibrations of strings. Some
of this letter has been cited already, but a crucial passage was
the following:

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1. SP V pp 240, 241, 242-3.
2. SP V p 242.
* "The Scale of the Futurist".

You know that the goal which has already crowned us,
accomplishing by means of string play that which is
now accomplished with cannon-fire, is to give to the
star-world power over people...[1]

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1. SP V p 313. Compare with Khlebnikov's words in "Our Found-
   ations": "In front of you is a futurist with his 'balalaika'.
   Attached to its strings, the spectre of humanity vibrates.
   And the futurist plays: and it seems to him that inter-
   national discord can be changed into the magic of strings."
   SP V p 240.

Chapter Nineteen:

A CHILD'S VIEW OF THE WORLD.

For Khlebnikov, life and art were inseparable. This chapter
touches on this theme in order to show some of the ways in
which the peculiarities of Khlebnikov's art also characterized
him in his personal life. In particular, it is argued that
not only did his poetic language often show "infantilist"
features, but his methods of work and thought resembled the
ways and the world-view of a child.

KHLEBNIKOV'S LIFE AND HIS WORK were inextricably intertwined.
It is often difficult to distinguish between the typical feat-
ures of his poetry and his habits and characteristics in every-
day life.[1]

The impression of inarticulateness created by much of Khleb-
nikov's poetic language was also created, as we have seen, by
his speech-behaviour on a personal level. If his work seemed
incomprehensible at times, then it was in this respect true to
its author, who was psychologically largely incomprehensible to
his friends[2] and has been misunderstood by most literary critics
ever since.

In his poetic imagination, the poet roamed freely across
centuries.[3] This was no merely literary stance—it reflected a
real incapacity to accommodate himself to life in what he called

> that world and that century into which, by the grace of
> good providence, I have been thrown...[4]

As Mandel'stam put it:

> Khlebnikov does not know what a contemporary means. He is
> a citizen of all history, of the whole structure of lang-
> uage and poetry. He is an idiotic Einstein who cannot make
> out which is nearer, a railroad bridge or the Igor Tale.[5]

A parallel incapacity related to the dimensions of space.

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1. One facet of this "confusion" is captured by Petrovsky in his
   description of Khlebnikov's work as "a mosaic of his biog-
   raphy"—quoted by Markov, The Longer Poems, p 34.
2. Khlebnikov was aware of this. He wrote in 1914: "...now I know
   for sure that there is no one capable of understanding me ex-
   cept myself."—Neizd. P. p 371.
3. As Khlebnikov wrote of his alter-ego, Ka: "He finds no obstac-
   les in time; Ka goes from dream to dream, intersecting time
   and achieving bronzes (the bronzes of time). He accomodates
   himself in the centuries as comfortably as in a rocking-chair.
   Isn't this the way the consciousness unites times together,
   like the armchair and the chairs of a drawing-room"—SP IV p 47
4. Neizd. P. p 358.
5. Burya i natisk, in Mandel'stam, Collected Works, 2, p 390.

In his dreams and in his art, Khlebnikov could not keep still.
He flitted across Asia, around the globe and among the stars.
The same incapacity to inhabit a given space afflicted him in
his everyday life. Shortly before the War, he was seized by what
his friends called a "hunger for space", and travelled up and
down across Russia several times. It was a habit which stayed
with him. His friend Spassky remarks that Khlebnikov

> literally lived in train stations, getting off one train
> and waiting for another.[1]

We noted earlier Khlebnikov's demand for

> the right to rooms in any town, and the right to change
> one's dwelling-place continually... the right to a home
> independently of the dimensions of space.[2]

It was a demand which was obviously seriously-meant. Khlebnikov
only wished that the trains in which he travelled could carry
him through time as well as space.[3]

Khlebnikov seemed somehow "primitivist" not only poetically
but in his whole being. Vyacheslav Ivanov wrote:

> He is like the author of the _Slovo_, who, by some miracle,
> continues to live in our age.[4]

He was also "infantilist" or "child-like" not merely linguistically
but as a person. Artyom Vesyoly has called him "a visionary with
child's eyes",[5] while Korney Zelinsky refers to him as a poet who
"became a child".[6] We have noted how the poet saw "meaning" in
the most varied numbers and facts, and how he believed he could
connect everything and foresee all. The child-psychologist Piaget
remarks that it is an important (if often overlooked) fact that
the child

> conceives the world as more logical than it really is. This
> makes him believe it possible to connect everything and to

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1. _Mayakovsky i ego sputniki_, Leningrad, 1940, p 68.
2. SP V p 159.
3. "It would be impossible to avoid destroying trains, if their
   movements were limited only to within space..."—SP V p 159.
4. Quoted by Markov, _The Longer Poems_, p 22.
5. Quoted by Markov, ibid p 23.
6. Quoted by Markov, ibid p 25.

foresee everything, and the assumptions which he makes
are endowed in his eyes with a richness in possible ded-
uctions which our adult logic could never allow them to
possess.[1]

It is not difficult to see that Khlebnikov's "infantilism" was
not merely an affectation, or a characteristic of his language
in much of his work, but was an important characteristic of
his thought-processes and world-view, too.[2] This may be looked
upon as an intellectual failing, even if it constituted an essen-
tial part of the charm of his work. On the other hand, it might
possibly be argued that a child's mode of thought expresses a
freshness, an emphasis on the will and even a degree of insight
lacking in the more habit-formed, resigned and routine mind of
the adult, and that an element of such "childishness" was essen-
tial in a poet who was to express some of the sense of newness
and optimism of the years of revolution. In those years, after
all, Khlebnikov was not the only one to believe in the possibil-
ity of inhabiting a more logical world and universe than mankind
had experienced in the past.

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1. Jean Piaget, The Language and Thought of the Child, London
   1960, p 212. He continues, in words equally applicable to
   Khlebnikov: "...reality is for the child both more arbitrary
   and better regulated than for us. It is more arbitrary, bec-
   ause nothing is impossible, and nothing obeys causal laws.
   But whatever may happen, it can always be accounted for, for
   behind the most fantastic events which he believes in, the
   child will always discover motives which are sufficient to
   justify them; just as the world of the primitive races is
   peopled with a wealth of arbitrary intentions, but is devoid
   of chance."—loc cit.
2. The whole of Piaget's book, it seems, might almost have been
   written to describe the peculiarities of Khlebnikov's outlook
   and techniques. It discusses childrens' view of words as
   magic forces (p 3), and their tendency (p 149) "to find in
   every event and every sentence a hidden meaning of greater
   depth than that which is apparent..." Piaget writes of "the
   spontaneous etymology which children practise, or their aston-
   ishing propensity for verbalism, i.e. the imaginative inter-
   pretation of imperfectly understood words.."(p 149). Often,
   he writes, "the child seems to be on the look-out only for
   words resembling each other in sense or in sound" (p 157).
   Piaget relates (p 158) "the picking out of verbal and even
   punning resemblances" to the way in which the mind works in
   a dream.

Chapter Twenty:

KHLEBNIKOV, SCIENCE AND THE SPIRIT OF THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION.

Khlebnikov was not a scientist, but his work was a reflection
in art of the scientific revolution of his age. He was not in
the normal sense a political revolutionary—and certainly no
Marxist—yet in important respects his concepts and work par-
alleled and gave artistic expression to the spirit of the
Russian Revolution.

TO PICTURE KHLEBNIKOV as living in a childish fantasy-world
would be an over-simplification and, to an extent, a distortion.
For he was also living in a technological future which, as we
have seen, was really beginning to come into being. His "logic"
may have shown infantilist features, but only in the sense that
the child expects more control over events and more "logic" in
the universe than there actually is. Whatever the defects of
Khlebnikov's "scientific" methods, at the root of his efforts
was a yearning for human mastery and a demand for precision and
system which also characterized the scientific revolution of his
age.

Khlebnikov was living in a childhood world and a world of
dreams, as perhaps any artist must do to a certain extent. But
there are different kinds of childishness, and different ways of
living in dreams. Infantilism may be escapist, inward-looking
and irresponsible, while "other-worldliness" may be dreamy,
mystical, romantic or idle and passive. Khlebnikov was none of
these things. Within his dream-world, the thrust of his efforts
was directed towards will-power, system, definition, logical
'computation' and intellectual order—in other words, towards the
very opposite of 'dreaminess' as normally understood. True, it
was still all ultimately "dream": Khlebnikov's "science" (with
the exception, perhaps, of some linguistic perceptions) was not
scientific in any accepted sense of that term. But while other
artists have dreamed dreams, there are not so many whose dreams
have been dreams about science. An essential—perhaps the essen-
tial—feature of real science is the ability to distinguish fact
from fantasy, and to subject results to some form of objective
(experimental or other) test. Such an ability Khlebnikov almost
wholly lacked. But, since Khlebnikov was an artist, the question

to be asked (if we are going to treat his work as a product of the scientific revolution of his age) is not whether his writings constituted science, but whether they expressed, from the sub-jective, human side, the <u>experience</u> of scientific mastery, the <u>sensation</u> of opening up new vistas of knowledge, and the optimism and hopes aroused by the discoveries of the new age. In the light of this question, as (it is hoped) the preceding pages have helped to show, Khlebnikov's works score perhaps more highly than any other literature of his time. Khlebnikov himself wrote of himself as "spending my days in a dream."[1] But what he was dreaming of was—as we have seen—the scientific and mathematical ordering of human society, history and language, the elimination of irrationality and violence from human life and the final con-quest by humankind of the forces controlling his destiny. It may have been an optimistic dream—perhaps childishly so. But it ex-pressed an important part of the spirit of the age.

Even in working on his "transrational language", Khlebnik-ov's real purpose was a scientific one. After describing the way in which "transrational language" has, in his words, "a special power over the consciousness", Khlebnikov defines his isolation and listing of the intrinsic meanings of consonant-sounds as "a way of making transrational language rational."[2] Khlebnikov did not subscribe to any philosophy of irrationalism—his aim was to bring what Jakobson called "the irrational structures of poetry" into the light of consciousness, so that they could be consciously mastered and used. Transrational language, in his view, had to become self-governing. Its ideal was to embody "the highest point of popular sovereignty in the life of the word..."[3] The inner world, the world of feelings—the "stormy people" of the "state" of the mind—should become the "government", become a new "reason" on a higher plane. This was a very different ideal from the aim of repudiating and dispensing with "government" or "reason" of any kind.

1. SP II p 45.
2. SP V 235. Having defined the meaning of the sound "Ch", Khleb-nikov declares: "And in this way, transrational language ceases to be transrational"—loc cit.
3. SP V p 225.

In the light of these considerations, Khlebnikov's "zaum" or "transreason" should be understood as representing an "ultra-rationalist" rather than "irrationalist" viewpoint. Perhaps "ultra-rationalist" is not the right word, but at least it may help emphasize the almost complete absence of obscurantism or mysticism in Khlebnikov's intentions.[1] This point is essential to an understanding of Khlebnikov's work as one expression of an essential element in the spirit of the Russian Revolution.

To understand Khlebnikov, it is necessary to see how his work finds its own place in, and sheds light upon, the world he was living in—a world which in some respects is that in which we continue to live today. Khlebnikov may have seemed like a survivor from a pre-historic age, or like a visitor from the space-age future. These semblances, however, do not alter the fact that he was a product of his age. The important thing is that the times he lived and wrote in were a strange and decisive turning-point in human history, and that the appearance of a meeting of past and future in a way characterized these revolutionary years no less than they characterized Khlebnikov himself.

Khlebnikov saw his own work as in a sense paralleling the work of the revolutionary workers of 1917. As he declared in his "Declaration of the Presidents of the Terrestrial Sphere" early in that year:

> We—are a special kind of weapon. Comrade workers, do not complain that we are going by a special route to the common goal. Every type of weapon has its own methods and laws... We are worker-architects (social-architects).[2]

The ultra-rationalist, systematizing, sound-tabulating tendencies in Khlebnikov's work were carried further by other Futurist writers and theoreticians—and also (in a much more genuinely scientific way) by the 'Opoyaz' or "Formalist" critics

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1. "The intuitions 'uncovered' by Khlebnikov in the language of words—and in the 'language' of numbers, mathematics—have always a rationalist character in the final analysis. Khlebnikov does not repudiate 'the language of understanding' but in every way strives to reform it, 'sharpen' and 'enliven' it'... Khlebnikov's intuitivism, and the whole of his metaphysic of language has a rationalistic, logical character"— Gofman, op cit p 229.

2. SP V p 164.

whose attentions were centred upon the Futurists. In his "Our
Foundations", Khlebnikov complained of the "harm" done by "un-
successfully constructed words", blaming this on the fact "that
there are no account-books kept of the expenditure of popular
intellect" and that "there are no railway-engineers of language".[1]
It was just this "technologist" interest in the "nuts and bolts",
as it were, of language which was thought of as characterizing
Futurism in the post-revolutionary period. Khlebnikov's idea of
constructing a "Mendeleyev's law"[2] or "atomic table" of sound
meanings was very much in tune with the revolutionary spirit of
the times. The artists grouped around Mayakovsky's "Left Front
of the Arts" liked to think of themselves as technicians, con-
cerned with the real business—the brass tacks—of poetic
creation, while others were concerned with sentiment, philosophy,
religion or ideology—anything but language itself.

This extreme rationalist aspect of Futurism—which was to
a large extent an extrapolation of Khlebnikov's linguistic exper-
iments and tabulations—obviously had something in common with
the "technologist", "rationalizing" and "planning" aims of the
Bolshevik revolution. Leon Trotsky acknowledged this when he
wrote:

> Futurism is against mysticism, against the passive deific-
> ation of nature, against the aristocratic and every other
> kind of laziness, against dreaminess, and against lach-
> rymosity—and stands for technique, for scientific organ-
> ization, for the machine, for planfulness, for will-power,
> for courage, for speed, for precision and for the new man,
> who is armed with all these things. The connection of the
> aesthetic 'revolt' with the moral and social revolt is
> direct...[3]

In Khlebnikov's case, the "parallel" with the social revolution
was in some ways a more distant one than in the case of Mayak-
ovsky and others. Khlebnikov's ideas and theories ran, in a
sense, parallel with the revolution's aims, but they did so as if

1. SP V p 228.
2. Loc cit.
3. Literature and Revolution, p 145.

on a distant, different plane.

According to Malevich:

Cubism and Futurism were the revolutionary forms in art
foreshadowing the revolution in political and economic
life of 1917.[1]

Tatlin went so far as to declare:

The events of 1917 in the social field were already brought
about in our art in 1914...[2]

Although in the early years of the Revolution, Futurism made a bid
for recognition almost as   the "official" school of art,[3]
the Bolshevik leaders themselves (where they were concerned at
all with such questions) disputed such categorical claims. Leon
Trotsky, however, while arguing that Futurism had not "mastered"
the Revolution, conceded that

it has an internal striving which, in a certain sense,
is parallel to it.[4]

This was more than he was prepared to say for any other school
of art.

The notion of Khlebnikov's work as expressing a "striving"
running in a peculiar way "parallel" to the Russian Revolution
is important to an understanding of the poet. We have already
surveyed Khlebnikov's attempts to "anticipate" and "foresee"
the events of history (conceived to be mathematically regular
and measurable) by means of algebraic formulae. The "striving"
or "impulse" behind these attempts, we have seen, was a determ-
ination to find order and meaning in the chaos of human affairs,
and to subject the processes of history to the human intellect
and will. It was a reaction against the historical passivity and
gloomy fatalism of the Symbolists.

Now it does not need much special insight to see that this
anti-Symbolist reaction, in itself, represented a striving run-
ning in a way parallel to one of the central themes of the
October revolution. One has only to turn to a passage of Trotsky's

1. Quoted by Camilla Gray, The Russian Experiment in Art, p 219.
2. Quoted by Gray, loc cit.
3. Trotsky, Literature and Revolution, p 111.
4. Ibid. p 112.

in which he describes (without in any way thinking of Khlebnikov)
the "algebra of revolution"—the dialectical method—to see how
close in a formal sense the parallel can appear to be:

> In the arena visible to the external eye, are chaos and
> floods, formlessness and boundlessness. But it is a counted
> and measured chaos, whose successive stages are foreseen.
> The regularity of their succession is anticipated and
> enclosed in steel-like formulas. In elemental chaos there
> is an abyss of blindness. But clear-sightedness and vigil-
> ance exist in a directing politics. Revolutionary strategy
> is not formless like an element; it is finished like a math-
> ematical formula. For the first time in history, we see
> the algebra of revolution in action.[1]

It is difficult to imagine that Khlebnikov would have disagreed
with a single word of the above—except that he would have seen
the description as applying, not to the method of Marxism (in
which he showed no interest) but to his own revolution-predicting
"algebra". But for Trotsky, the idea of a revolutionary "algebra"
is basically a metaphor, intended only to have an approximate
relationship with reality. Writing of the "counted and measured"
phases of history, he can hardly be thought to mean that the time-
intervals between them are numerically-fixed. Describing the
"regularity of succession" of these phases, he does not assume
that they recur at fixed intervals of, say, 317 years. But Khleb-
nikov, as we have seen, does assume this. Extremist as he was,
he might almost have been thought to have been deliberately
caricaturing, exaggerating—carrying "to its logical conclusion"—
the revolutionary dream of mastering fate and history by means
of science. He took the idea of an "algebra of revolution" not
metaphorically but in the most literal possible way. It was not
deliberate caricature, however. The idea came to Khlebnikov long
before 1917, as we have seen, and was taken in a deadly serious
way, without his being aware of any parallels which seem to pres-
ent themselves to us today. The coincidence seems strange—per-

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1. <u>Literature and Revolution</u>, p 104.

haps almost as strange as Khlebnikov's correct prediction of the revolution's date in 1912.

There also seems to be a certain relationship between Khlebnikov's ideas on time and the ideas of the Russian Revolution, although here again the parallel is in the main between conceptual forms rather than concrete ideas. We have seen that Khlebnikov sensed, apparently, a close relationship between the future and the prehistoric past. In place of the straight-line or linear conception of time, he believed he was establishing "a new attitude towards time" which taught "that distant points can be closer than two neighbouring ones..."[1] It does not need much knowledge of Marxism to perceive that there is a kind of "parallel" here similar to the one just described. Engels wrote of historical and natural evolution as a "spiral form of development"[2], and, writing of "primitive communism", defined it as the task of the social revolution "to restore common property on a higher plane of development..."[3] Lenin wrote in this connection of "the apparent return to the old", and of the "repetition" of lower evolutionary phases "at a higher stage".[4] In relation particularly to Russia, Marx , after describing the disintegration of the ancient peasant "mir" or commune, wrote in an un-sent letter to Zasulich:

> To save the Russian commune, there must be a Russian revolution...

And he went on to describe the circumstances under which "this commune will soon become an element that regenerates Russian society..."[5] It is obvious that the Bolsheviks thought of themselves as, in a certain sense, "restoring" common property, enacting an "apparent return to the old", although "on a higher plane of development". This is true in the sense that they believed in the dialectic—even though the idea of a kind of "restoration" of the "mir" (which Marx himself was evidently unsure of) came to nothing. It is not difficult to see, in this

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1. SP V p 242.
2. Dialectics of Nature, Moscow, 1964, p 17.
3. Anti-Duhring, Moscow, 1959, p 477.
4. Philosophical Notebooks, Collected Works, M 1961 Vol 38 p 222.
5. Quoted in: D McLellan, The Thought of K.Marx, London '71 p 137.

context, how Khlebnikov's view of the Revolution as a breaking-in of the primeval world found at least some support in the wider ferment of ideas of the period. We have noted already McLuhan's idea of the age of Radio as an "electric return to the tribal paleolithic age, to the world of the hunter".[1] This idea, if accepted, would seem to complement the Marxist view of the future as a kind of "return" to the stateless, tribal "primitive communism" of the past. In any event—whatever our opinion of the validity of such views—merely to appreciate that they have been and can be held is to realize the peculiar inadequacy of critics such as Renato Poggioli, who fail to grasp how Khlebnikov's yearning for the distant past could possibly have co-existed with any real commitment to the future.

A widespread view of the relationship between Russian Futurism and the Russian Revolution is that it was essentially a "mistake", on the part of the poets, to see any connection at all. Having noted that Futurism began to disintegrate between 1914 and 1916, Markov expresses this view when he explains:

> The Revolution brought new blood to the movement, because Futurists, mistakenly, associated themselves with the revolution and expected now no obstacles in their development.[2]

A far more perceptive view of the relationship is presented by Erlich, who sees the "aesthetic" or "cultural" revolution as an integral part of the social revolution:

> The Revolution of 1917 did not confine itself to a thorough overhauling of Russia's political and social structure; it also shook loose fixed patterns of behaviour and accepted moral codes and philosophical systems. This cultural upheaval was not a mere by-product of political revolution; it was spurred and accelerated, rather than brought about, by the breakdown of the old regime.[3]

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1. Counter-Blast, p 43.
2. The Province of Russian Futurism, SEEJ, VIII 4 (1964) p 406.
3. Russian Formalism, The Hague, 1965 p 80.

Something like this view was also expressed by Lev Trotsky, who was one of the few Bolshevik leaders to write perceptively about Futurism and is therefore worth quoting. Writing of "Khlebnikov's or Kruchenykh's making ten or one hundred new derivative words out of existing roots",[1] Trotsky insists that such experiments lie "outside of poetry", even though they "may have a certain philological interest" and

> may, in a certain though very modest degree, facilitate the development of the living and even of the poetic language, and forecast a time when the evolution of speech will be more consciously directed.[2]

But when he comes to survey the overall philological work achieved by the Futurists, Trotsky is much less equivocal, and it is evident that he treats the "linguistic revolution" as very much part of the wider social revolt:

> The struggle against the old vocabulary and syntax of poetry, regardless of all its Bohemian extravagances, was a progressive revolt against a vocabulary that was cramped and selected artificially with the view of being undisturbed by anything extraneous; a revolt against impressionism, which was sipping life through a straw; a revolt against symbolism which had become false in its heavenly vacuity, against Zinaida Hippius and her kind, and against all the other squeezed lemons and picked chicken-bones of the little world of the liberal-mystic intelligentsia. If we survey attentively the period left behind, we cannot help but realize how vital and progressive was the work of the Futurists in the field of philology. Without exaggerating the dimensions of this "revolution" in language, we must realize that Futurism has pushed out of poetry many worn words and phrases, and has made them full-blooded again and, in a few cases, has happily created new words and phrases which have entered, or are entering, into the vocabulary of poetry and which can enrich the living language. This refers not only to the separate word, but also to its place among other words, that is, to syntax. In the field of word-formations, Futurism truly has gone somewhat beyond the limits which a living language can hold. The same thing, however, has happened with the Revolution; and is the "sin" of every living movement.[3]

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1. _Literature and Revolution_, p 133.
2. Loc cit.
3. Ibid p 142.

To the extent that Trotsky found fault with the Futurists, it was only owing to what he saw as "sins" of a similar nature— sins of over-optimism, of impatience and of "ultra-leftism" which had characterized the Revolution itself. The "formalism" of the Futurists represented an insistence on shaping life, fusing with life and overturning the "contents" of the old world (giving "form" priority over "content" in that sense) in a thoroughly revolutionary way. As Nikolai Punin put it in 1919:

> Art is form (being), just as socialist theory and Communist revolution is form... The Internationale is just as much a futurist form as any other creative form... I ask what difference is there between the Third Internationale and Tatlin's bas-relief of Khlebnikov's "Martian Trumpet"? To me there is none.[1]

Mayakovsky made a similar claim when he declared:

> The revolution of substance—socialism-anarchism—is not to be thought of apart from the revolution of form—futurism.[2]

The purpose of the new art was not to communicate ideas (other means were available for that—perhaps even a language of numbers, as Khlebnikov suggested[3]) but to create things and life, and re-create the world. As Brik declared:

> We don't need your ideas! ...If you are artists, if you can create and make—then make us our human nature, our human things.[4]

It was in this spirit that El Lissitzky declared:

> we shall give a new face to this globe. we shall reshape it so thoroughly that the sun will no longer recognize its satellite.[5]

Trotsky agreed that there would come a "time when life will reach such proportions that it will be entirely formed by art..."[6]

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1. Quoted in Woroszylsky, op cit pp 258-9.
2. Quoted in: ibid, p 193.
3. SP V p 158.
4. Quoted by Robert A Maguire, Red Virgin Soil, Soviet Literature in the 1920s, New Jersey, 1968, p 152.
5. In: Lissitzky-Kuppers, op cit, p 328.
6. Literature and Revolution, pp 136-37.

But he insisted that, despite the Russian revolution, it would
be a long time before this came about. In the meantime—along-
side more 'modern' forms of art—an art which "mirrored" life
would continue to be required.[1] Trotsky criticized the Futur-
ists' attempt "to tear out of the future that which can only
develop as an inseparable part of it", saying that the artists
responsible reminded him of "anarchists who anticipate the
absence of government in the future" but "have no bridge to the
future."[2]

For Trotsky, then, the kind of world which the Futurists
required for their art was one which could only emerge after
a long period of revolutionary work. Nevertheless, this future
would emerge. The "future" of the Futurists, in this sense, was
also the "future" fought for by the revolutionary movement as a
whole. There was an intimate and necessary connection between
the Futurists' dreams and the aims of the Revolution, even if
there were disagreements as to how the future could be reached.

It is not necessary to agree with these arguments to see
that the view of Futurism's revolutionary commitments as a "mis-
take" is shallow in the extreme. One can agree or disagree with
the aims and hopes of the revolutionary movement as a whole. But
to describe the revolution's artistic expression as "mistakenly"
associated with its other expressions is simply nonsensical.

The real "sin" of the Futurists—an extreme revolutionary
optimism, impatience and millenniarism—had also been, to a
large extent (as Trotsky concedes), the "sin" of the Revolution
itself. In the earliest period of the Revolution, many even of
the wildest dreams and expectations of the Futurists could be
seen as having at least some foundation in the wider revolutionary
optimism of the time. As Shklovsky writes:

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1. <u>Literature and Revolution</u>, p 137.
2. Ibid pp 134-5.

> In the early years of the revolution there was no existence, or rather, the storm itself was existence. There was no man of calibre who did not go through a period of faith in the revolution. One believed in the Bolsheviks. Germany and England would fall—and the frontiers that no-one needed any more would be ploughed up. And heaven would be rolled up like a scroll of parchment...[1]

When Khlebnikov signed manifestos on behalf of the "Presidents of the Terrestrial Sphere" and Kamensky proclaimed the Futurists "the poets of all-mankind's revolution", it was in an atmosphere of just such hopes and expectations as these.

To Mayakovsky, the revolution represented the ultimate defiance of byt. The whole earth was engulfed in a revolutionary ocean—liquid and flowing—in which states, bourgeois relationships and the personal agonies of the past were being swept away.[2] But as the dream of a world revolution failed to materialize, and the revolution in Russia grew cold, the reign of byt seemed to be establishing itself with a grip more total even than before. Mayakovsky dreamed of a new revolution, and of a Fourth and a Fifth International. But the process of cooling and solidification went on. "By April, 1930", as Erlich writes,

> when Mayakovsky shot himself through the heart, the revolutionary chaos which he celebrated so resonantly had solidified into the mold of the most elaborate system of cultural repression in modern history.[3]

Mayakovsky needed revolution as other men need air.[4]

Khlebnikov, too, needed the same element of chaos in which to breathe. It may be that he was even less capable of surviving without it than Mayakovsky. Writing of the chaotic revolutionary period, Korney Zelinsky observes that life in it was an "unreal" one—an "existence of being constantly on the move"—and suggests:

> Perhaps only the "chairman of the world", Velimir Khlebnikov, who was entirely immersed in it, wished for nothing else. All the others began to organize their existence as they could...[5]

1. Quoted in: Woroszylski, op cit pp 284-5.
2. Stahlberger, op cit pp 127-31.
3. The Double Image, p 14.
4. Shklovsky suggests that Mayakovsky would have committed suicide much earlier had the revolution not broken out—see Stahlberger op cit p 122.
5. Quoted in: Woroszylski, op cit p 285.

There is no need at this point to detail Khlebnikov's view of the
revolution: the preceding pages have shown how he saw it as a
"rebirth", a leap into the future and at the same time a return
to the prehistoric past. To Khlebnikov, the revolution was "his
own" revolution—he had, after all, predicted its date long in
advance—and an event through which his theories and dreams were
being materialized. When it occurred, it was almost a familiar
thing to him.[1] It was a "shift"[*]—an abrupt transfer on to a new
plane of existence. He had long been used to such things in his
own poetry: the entire revolution was almost to be seen as only
a colossal "realization" of an artistic "device". It was a move-
ment in which the right to terrestrial property was being des-
troyed and replaced by the battle for time. But Khlebnikov had
"foreseen" this in 1916.[2] In the storm of revolutions, Khlebnikov
and his colleagues were to be crowned with laurel-wreaths and made
"Presidents of the Terrestrial Sphere." But already in 1916, Khleb-
nikov wrote that he had been made "head of the first State of
Time in the world".[3] It was almost as if, for Khlebnikov, the
Revolution had already in a sense happened in advance—as if it
really did not matter too much what particular point in time he
was writing in, since he stood in a way astride and outside the
time dimension, determining its course as a railway-pointsman
guides the path of a train.

The starting-point for Khlebnikov was the revolution of
form. The core of his revolt was a linguistic one. Where Mayak-
ovsky fought to defy the reign of 'byt' as the hardening and
fossilization of life, Khlebnikov fought first and foremost
against the hardening and fossilization of language—a struggle
which in effect took (to a large extent) the form of a fight
against the linguistic results and implications of literacy.
The struggle was for a restoration of the primacy of sound in
language and for the impermanence, pervasiveness and "darkness"
(in the sense earlier discussed) of the world of sounds. The

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1. Compare with Shklovsky's comment that "Mayakovsky entered the
   revolution as he would enter his own home"—quoted in: Worosz-
   ylski op cit p 174.
2. SP V p 132.
3. SP V p 130.
* "sdvig".

fight for fluidity, transience, newness, strangeness and change in language (and the fight for "inventions" in science and technology) seemed naturally to be a fight not for space but for time. Where Mayakovsky fought against 'byt' in social and political life as state officialdom and bureaucracy,[1] Khlebnikov fought against it as "the states of space".

Khlebnikov welcomed "inventions" in general, but reserved his most ardent enthusiasm for those connected with "lightning". He saw Radio as "the language of lightning" and believed that it would achieve the aim of his "universal language"—the unification of mankind. Khlebnikov treated Radio very much as he treated the "magical" and "transrational" language of primitive chants, prayers and folk-culture, saw humanity as a "ray" and talked of "a sonorous string of tribes" stretching across the globe. He believed that the entire Earth itself could be treated "as a resonant plate".[2] Radio and its visual extension would become "the ears and eyes" of the world.[3] Although he usually referred to the future as a "State of Time", he also thought of it as a "state of sounds".[4] The entire globe would be embraced by a web of sound-waves; territorial "frontiers" and "spaces" would "wilt".[5] Khlebnikov saw this process as occurring not by whim or individual choice but by necessity—inevitably and, in a way, "compulsorily". He wrote to Mayakovsky in 1921:

> I am thinking of writing a thing in which all 3 milliard of humanity would participate, and in which it would be obligatory for mankind to play. But ordinary language is unsuitable for it; a new one will have to be created step by step.[6]

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1. See Mayakovsky's *The Bathhouse* and *Bedbug* in particular.
2. SP V p 161.
3. SP IV p 292.
4. SP V p 89.
5. Ibid p 132.
6. Ibid p 317.

This suggestion should be seen as an elaboration of Khlebnikov's idea of "the world as a poem"[1], which we noted earlier. A related notion was Khlebnikov's picture of the futurist (<u>budetlyan</u>) as a balalaika-player, plucking the strings of the globe, of human heart-beats and of humanity's fate.[2]

Some ideas of Marshall McLuhan which seem relevant have been discussed above. Khlebnikov's "world as a poem" idea, however, can be related not only to McLuhan's concept of "electronic" and "technological" art taking "the whole earth and its population as its material", but also to the ideas of some who were living and writing in Russia in Khlebnikov's own time. Vassily Kamensky writes, discussing the futurists in the early revolutionary years, that

> new creative projects of a cosmic scale were born in our circle every day.[3]

In relation to plans to stage Mayakovsky's play depicting the world revolution, Kamensky recalls:

> We were dreaming of a revolutionary mass theatre of the future, where thousands of people, as well as hundreds of cars and airplanes, would fill a gigantic arena, creating for millions the vision of, say, the heroic epic of the October Revolution.[4]

However, here the mention of cars and airplanes indicates that Kamensky was still thinking in mechanical, rather than electronic terms. It was electricity and Radio which seemed to promise the most effective means of creating an art-form to involve millions and embrace the globe. Where Khlebnikov talked of "people-rays" and "lightning", Malevich spoke of "I-beams" and "electricity".[5] Khlebnikov's vision of Radio uniting the globe and of the world as a poem was matched by the words of El Lissitzky, written in 1920:

> only a creative work which fills the whole world with its energy can join us together by means of its energy components to form a collective unity like a circuit of electric current.[6]

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1. SP V p 259.
2. Ibid p 239.
3. In: Woroszylski, op cit p 233.
4. Loc cit. The play was Mayakovsky's "Mystery Bouffe".
5. <u>Iskusstvo Kommuny</u>, no 12, Feb 23 1919; in: Malevich op cit p 72
6. Lissitzy-Kuppers, op cit p 330.

At first sight, Khlebnikov's world view, like much of his
poetry, seems to be composed of various incomplete and incompat-
ible fragments. There are his views on sound-meanings, his numer-
ical researches, his world-government project, his dream of con-
quering fate, his conception of the prehistoric past, his enthus-
iasm for "inventions" and so on. Just as Markov sees a conflict
between Khlebnikov's poetry and his thought, so it is possible to
see a conflict between almost every element of his thought and
every other one. His primitivism clashes with his futurism, his
Russian nationalism with his universalism, his mathematical "ul-
tra-rationalism" with his championship of transreason and his
"formalism" with his revolutionary commitment. Khlebnikov himself
was aware that he had not explained himself.[1] His great book on
numbers and fate was left unwritten. Just before he died, it
seems that he began almost to panic at the thought of what he had
left undone. Perhaps also a sense that the revolution was cooling
and failing added to his alarm. In any event, Khlebnikov's friend
Spassky recalls that in the spring of 1922 there was a "disturbed
aura" around Khlebnikov, which began to get worse. Spassky visited
Khlebnikov in Moscow and was walking with him one day through
some dark, winding alleys:

> Just then I remarked, I do not know why, that it was time to
> put Khlebnikov's work in order. I said that it was all scatt-
> ered, a number of brochures, lost in space. Where is it all?
> There is no book to speak of.
> He reacted to this with unexpected passion. There was an-
> xiety and excitement in what he was saying. He did not com-
> plain about any particular person. But he spoke about care-
> less treatment of his manuscripts, about unrealized proj-
> ects...
> In the spring Khlebnikov suddenly felt extremely tired. He
> would sit sulking in his brother's room. He would rush to the
> table, spread his manuscripts, panic, and sigh over them. He
> would rush to the Briks, full of anxious decisiveness. On one
> occasion he took me with him. He was in a hurry, as if an-
> xious to explain something. In answer to the question from
> behind the door, he frantically shouted his name. The Briks
> were not in; Khlebnikov rushed on. It was as if he were look-
> ing for someone with whom he wanted to share some urgent ref-
> lections.
> Sometime in May he moved out of his brother's apartment and
> left Moscow.
> In the summer news came of his death.[2]

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1. Neizd P. p 371; SP III p 307.
2. In: Woroszylski, op cit p 294.

With so many of Khlebnikov's concepts only half-formed and fragmentarily-expressed, there are obvious difficulties and risks in any attempt at interpretation. In the preceding pages, an attempt has been made to show that, despite the reality of the conflicting tensions in Khlebnikov's thought, the outlines of a relatively coherent and consistent world-view can at a deeper level be discerned. Central to his view of the future was his concept of revolution as a "shift" or "displacement" of temporal planes. The oral past and the electronic future were con-joined, in a process which cut out the present. Man and the universe were being turned on a new axis—the axis of time instead of that of space. Khlebnikov's excitement and anticipation began, as we have seen, long in advance of the revolution itself. But at no time was his enthusiasm so great as in the days immediately preceding the Bolshevik insurrection. "In those days", as he wrote afterwards,

> the word "Bolshevik" rang with a strange pride, and it soon became clear that the phantoms of "today" were about to be ripped apart by gunfire.[1]

In his imagination it was he and his colleagues who had seized the Winter Palace and the communications-media and were broadcasting to the world:

> Here. The Winter Palace. To Alexandra Fedorovna Kerenskaya. To all. To all. To all... What? You still don't know that the Government of the Terrestrial Sphere already exists? Well, well—so you don't know it exists! The Government of the Terrestrial Sphere. Signatures.[2]

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1. SP IV p 109.
2. Ibid p 110.